

DACIA SINGLETON.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

“ALTOGETHER WRONG,” “WHAT MONEY CAN’T DO,”

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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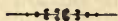


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DACIA SINGLETON.



CHAPTER I.

FATHER LEIGH.

THE Rev. Father Leigh was not a man to lose an opportunity; he struck when he found the iron hot; yet he never appeared to use force, or to endeavour to hasten on any thing. If he found a door closed at which he desired to enter, he waited patiently till events gave him easy access; but at the first opening he was in.

Himself a convert to Catholicism of a few years only, he had all the infatuation for his religion that is proverbial with neophytes. He was steeped to the neck in all its superstitions; he regarded all who from ignorance were without

the pale of the Church as wretched souls to be pitied and prayed for; he looked on those who, knowing the distinction and understanding the precepts, yet refused to enter it, as utterly lost, past all hope of redemption.

He was remarked and noted for his zeal in making proselytes. There were more names down in the register kept at St. Wilfred's of sheep brought into the fold through Father Leigh's instrumentality than by any of the other fathers. He argued well; he carried conviction in his tone of voice; he was so earnest, so ardent, but never apparently excited; he always seemed grave and calm; yet he was young,—barely five-and-thirty. And it was a heavy sorrow—as he one day told Miss Singleton—that had been the means of bringing him to see that truth and salvation were to be found in the Roman Catholic Church alone. He lost his young wife—to whom he was devotedly attached—a few months after his marriage; and when this world had no longer any attraction for him, he sought comfort and consolation in religion; but he found none, till he, like her—seemingly by chance, but in truth through God's mercy—had

been guided to His only Church on earth. Very soon afterwards he resolved to forsake all and devote himself to God; he was priested in due time, and from that moment had never known a moment's sorrow. Such was his own account of himself.

Dacia was an apt pupil. She learnt quickly and readily. She asked but few questions; and those few were all answered through quotations from Scripture. She never once doubted, after the third interview, but that she was doing what was right, and that till now she had been living in a state of ignorant sinfulness. Any points that at first perplexed her and seemed difficult of credence she set down as being so merely from their novelty to her, and the want of being accustomed to hear of them as facts and matters of course. Would she not, she asked herself, if she only now for the first time heard of the Holy Trinity, or of our Saviour's life on earth, have found these points hard to reconcile to her senses and trying to her belief? In this light, therefore, she looked on Transubstantiation, the Immaculate Conception, and the divine worship paid to the Virgin as Mo-

ther of God. She thought she ought to believe them, and so she accepted them with the rest. She endeavoured to do as Father Leigh advised, and saturate herself in the precepts of the Church, so as to become familiarised with them ; and above all to set aside every kind of prayer she had used in the heretical Church, he trusted she would now soon leave for ever.

When Dacia Singleton first enveloped herself in this mantle of religion, in order to find a refuge from her great earthly trial, she did not know that there lay sharper stings to a woman's feelings beneath its shelter than ever she could have to contend with in the broad light of earthly troubles. For there you battle face to face with the foe ; but in the Church of Rome the mask of religion hides, or at any rate disguises, the real enemy that lurks beneath.

Father Leigh had already obtained both power and influence over Dacia ; and therefore when he urged her to allow no further time to be lost before she took the final step, pointing out to her that having it in her power and yet not taking advantage of it might cause God's anger to be

roused, and He might strike her down before she was received amongst His chosen, and thus she ran the awful risk of forfeiting her salvation—she at once consented to fix an early day for her formal reception into the Catholic Church.

She knew that confession was a form all Catholics were compelled to submit to ; but she did not know till the day before that fixed for her baptism that she would have to make a confession of all the errors of her life—a general confession, as it is termed—before being admitted. This gave her naturally ample matter for serious and deep thought ; yet her sins were few and trivial enough : she could remember nothing worse than surreptitiously abstracting a shilling from her money-box, when about seven years of age, in order to give a little girl who was crying bitterly over a basket of broken eggs she had accidentally let fall, and for which she feared the life being half shaken out of her by her mother. Far into the night did Dacia sit pondering over her past : she began at the beginning, that is, as far as her memory went, and gradually advanced till her Dunkerque life commenced ; and then another train of thought

came. Sad and bitter were the tears she wept as she thought over her brief moments of happiness, and her life-long miserable future. She thanked God that Hugh Mostyn was in no way concerned with the subject that had for hours been engrossing all her thoughts; she had naught to confess that in any way need bring forward his name. No falsehood, no deceit, had she ever practised on her mother concerning him that she need accuse herself of; there had been no stolen interviews, no clandestine correspondence to reproach herself for. No other faults suggested themselves to her mind as capable of being committed; but she was to learn otherwise on the morrow.

She was but a girl still in her innocence and purity, though a woman in knowledge of the heart's sorrow. But on the morrow she would be made wiser; she would be made a woman in knowledge of the iniquity of the world. She would learn, if she at twenty was ignorant of evil, all her sex were not necessarily so, or considered to be so, at any rate by some priests in the Church of Rome. At twenty a girl might have been guilty of every sin humanity is subject to; she

may have gone through the whole Ten Commandments, and broken each and all; and on the principle of possibility do they act. They take it for granted every wickedness in thought, word, and deed may have been committed, and they dive into the uttermost depths with their questions; for it is very little they leave to voluntary admission on the penitent's part.

It was on Wednesday, the 29th May, that Dacia had arranged to be at St. Wilfred's by noon. A warm bright day it was, and it had its influence. A feeling akin to hope seemed to spring up in her heart. It was not hope; at least not earthly hope, for she imagined she had ceased to have earthly wishes. She thought it was the act of doing right meeting with its reward; calmness and peace beginning to tell within her as the result of having cast from her all things connected with this world. And there is no doubt, in one sense, she was right: if we could and would close up all our heart's feelings, and cast away every wish and desire linked with people and things here below, we should find a marvellous accession of contentment. Events would not dis-

turb us—even death itself would not create any great dismay ; and at the approach of it to ourselves the probability is, under such a phase of circumstances, we should hail it with joy ; we should gladly greet that which would put an end to our dreary, loveless life.

But such a state of things is not natural, and therefore not frequent ; and in nunneries, where such circumstances would be more in keeping than in the broad and beautiful world, it is less met with than any where else. There are instances, but so few, so rare, that they but form the rule which proves the reverse. Nuns seldom or ever love each other ; but they find something to love—their father confessor, if driven into a corner, and nothing better is to be found. Their—forbidden—interest in the events going on in the world stirs up strife and arguments amongst them as hot and exciting as they do with us, who are without their walls ; and though it is true they are not permitted to read newspapers, they are permitted to listen to them being read by others, so they lose little of what passes ; and it is right enough it should be so : the wrong lies in their not choosing

to admit it; they won't own to their interest in temporal matters. But to return to Dacia Singleton.

She felt very much in the wide open world as a nun ought to feel shut up in her cell. She had schooled herself to a feeling of indifference to all around her; she thought she cared for nothing in the broad world; that her heart had become deadened to all feelings of affection; that she had succeeded in stifling all natural, and therefore earthly wishes; and she prided herself on this achievement: she gloried in having, as she fondly fancied, destroyed all that was beautiful and loveable in her nature, and was at peace with herself.

A blessed feeling, in truth, and one that is apt to make us feel at peace with all the world beside. And so she walked on till she came to her destination; she went in beneath the archway, now familiar to her, and was admitted by the same lay brother she saw on the occasion of her first visit. He knew—all there knew—that that day was to see her made one of them, to see her made a holy and righteous being like themselves. Miss Singleton was not a girl likely to be seen any

where unnoticed, still less in a place like St. Wilfred's, where six-and-twenty priests resided, and where the eldest was not fifty, and the youngest not three-and-twenty.

Father Leigh was not less punctual than Dacia; he was waiting for her in the parlour. The preliminary forms gone through, she went with him into the church for the purpose of making her confession. He turned to her at the last moment and said—

“If you would prefer any other priest to receive your confession,—one who has never seen you or heard of you,—say so, and I will see one of the fathers about it; but you understand thoroughly, I hope, Miss Singleton, that whatever is told under the seal of confession is sacred.”

“Yes, Father Leigh, I quite know that, and thank you for giving me the option; but I am quite prepared to make my confession to yourself.”

I cannot here—if I would—go into the detail of what passed between the Rev. Father Leigh and Dacia Singleton; it is neither a fit place to relate it in, nor a fit subject to handle in a work of this kind; it will suffice to say, that never as long as

she lived did Dacia forget the horror and amazement she experienced beneath his cross-questioning. He went through in rotation the Ten Commandments, going into each one severally, and giving some of them colourings such as she had never dreamt of. At last he asked her one question, which at first she did not comprehend; but when he made it clear to her, she rose from her knees, an indignant denial bursting from her lips, and came from out the confessional and stood in the body of the church.

He felt he had gone far enough, and he joined her. She had now to be baptised before receiving absolution; and as she made an objection again to return to the confessional, he allowed her to go into an inner room, where he then spoke the words that absolved her from all her sins, making her, as he told her, pure and spotless as a true child of God.

Yet, when she came out of St. Wilfred's, and soon after reached the Park, and let her thoughts take their own way, she felt not one whit better or less free from sin than she had done before: no, nor half so pure as she was before her ears were sullied by the questions put to her by the spiritual

guide she had herself made choice of. Let us hope, for his own sake, that it was his overearnestness made him outstep the boundary of decency, and that his zealous fervour in the cause, the enthusiastic bigotry that marked every action of his life, and not wanton wrong, actuated him.

Poor Dacia's mind was in a woful state of confusion; shame and indignation seemed pretty evenly balanced: shame at all the evil thoughts that he had clearly made her see and feel herself guilty of, indignation at having been so terribly humbled. But by the time she reached home she had arrived at the doubtful conclusion, that all she had gone through that morning was a painful necessity; that it was for the good of her soul; and that it only showed the sinful tendency within her that she should dare to question what one did who was elected and appointed by Christ's representative on earth, and therefore who could not possibly err.

There was one point, one question, that he had raised which led to his drawing out from her—she could not remember how—every trifling oc-

currence in connection with Hugh Mostyn ; and that entailed not only what concerned herself being known, but all his own private history, as far as she knew it. Her one great secret, that she had hoped no living soul would ever learn, had thus been mercilessly wrenched from her—not gently, not tenderly, but sternly and pitilessly ; and then the guilt and sinfulness of having entertained love in her heart for a man bound by indissoluble ties to another was laid bare before her in so aggravated and unnecessary a form, that it gave birth to the knowledge of a description of wrong of which she had hitherto been totally and entirely ignorant.

On the same principle that the nicest people have the nastiest notions, so are the most sanctified invariably the least pure in thought and word, whatever their deeds may be, which, as a rule, they keep hidden from public gaze. They think it wicked to dress sin in a mantle of decent words ; if it exists, let it be distinctly visible, and all its horrors and deformity exhibited. And so Father Leigh, fearing Miss Singleton would not entertain the holy horror it was meet and right

she should at having been guilty of nursing and fostering a love—which she had believed innocent and pure, but which, for all that, in no way lessened her fault—that was against the laws of God and man, he drew aside the veil that had hitherto shut out from her eyes the iniquity and depravity that humanity is capable, but not always guilty of, and wrenched from her those blessed gifts—faith and trust in mankind.

Perhaps Father Leigh did not believe in that ignorance of evil, which, by Dacia's counter questions, he must have thought she was assuming, or was actually the case with her. His knowledge of women, it is true, had chiefly consisted in what he had learnt of them through the confessional; and that may blunt the fine edge of a man's notions of woman's innocency: still there was something in Dacia Singleton's face that would have made most men pause before they uttered such words as he thought fit to address to her. They seemed to burn through her very brain when she thought of them; and she resolved to do her utmost to obliterate them from her memory. There was no need to ponder over

them ; they were not connected with her religion, at all events.

But there still stood before her, and must always stand, in bold relief the wrong there existed in loving Hugh Mostyn. She thought, so lately as that very morning, that she had crushed out this affection, that she had mastered it sufficiently to keep it from interfering with the quietude of her daily life. But she now found she had done nothing of the sort ; there it was, she felt distinctly enough, as strong, as full of life, as on the first day it took root within her. It had lain dormant, as it were, for a time, whilst her mind had been occupied with the tenets of her new religion ; it had not been disturbed by seeing or speaking of its object ; but now it was roused again into full existence, and with it the knowledge that it was sinful. It had not been sinful before ; but Father Leigh had made it so now, and so she felt it to be.

To one with Dacia's keen sense of right, and tenacity of feeling, this was a bitter weed to have planted side by side with her love. Love and shame—they ill accord, but often meet ; then join

and go hand in hand, till love is overpowered beneath the oppressive weight of its companion, and fades and dies. But it could not be so with her ; and there was no need to put her on her guard ; she was safe from all evil : in her wildest moments of sorrow she had no thought beyond praying she might be released from it ; in her calmest she never went beyond the resolve never to wed another, as she could not wed him. If there was nothing heroic or martyr-like in this, there at least was no crime.

Now, however, it was different ; from this time forth the whole wore another phase, and this thought, this newly-acquired knowledge, bade fair to sap her very life-blood away. If she could but wipe out the past from her memory ; if she could but forget, what a blessed thing it would be ! But that is exactly what she could not do, neither by day nor by night ; it seemed to haunt her in her very dreams, and in her waking moments nothing drove it from her.

Shame ! The dreadful word seemed branded with a red-hot iron on her brain and on her heart. Sometimes reason would attempt to guide her ;

but she and reason had little to say to each other just now; they seemed totally to have parted company; or only met the more to prove their separation. Dacia's whole being was under an influence she had neither the wish nor power to shake off. She tried to seem contented—happy she made no pretence of being; she endeavoured to be thoughtful and gentle towards her mother; she was kind to all, but she evidently—to those who saw and watched her carefully—was suffering intensely.

Mrs. Singleton was decidedly better: the change had done her a marked good; she was able to shake off the cold that in Dunkerque had seemed to have taken so firm a hold. But it was hard to say whether she derived most pleasure or pain from being once more in her own country, and near to her eldest daughter. The constant jealousy she could not help feeling at Cecily's circumstances, when contrasted with her own, was one incessant worry to her. If to-day she dined with the Monerieffes, to-morrow was sure to be spent in lamentations over her own poverty and meagre fare. If she one afternoon

had the use of her daughter's carriage, the next she would bemoan that she no longer had one of her own.

Then, again, the lodgings: they were nice enough, and in many respects a thousand times more comfortable than those she had quitted on the other side of the water; but they, as Mrs. Singleton urged, were but a hundred francs a month, and these were precisely double. Then, if they were more comfortable, they were not half so pretty; and the cooking was simply abominable. But there was more society, and a society much more congenial to Mrs. Singleton's tastes. There were no Chattering Chorleys or incomprehensible Thomases amongst her visitors; in that respect she felt much better off, and felt as if she was once more amongst civilised people.

Mrs. Monerieffe was tolerably kind to her mother—that is, in this sort of way: if she did not want the carriage herself, she sent it to her mother; and she insisted on her and Dacia dining in Hertford-street every Sunday. James did not object to this; he did not look on his wife's mother and sister in the light of guests. Then

she would occasionally send them a box for the Opera—that is, when she herself had had one given her, and was unable from other engagements to use it. So that, all things put together, Mrs. Singleton did not complain of her eldest daughter; though she found ample to find fault with in her youngest.

One great cause of contention and murmuring was, that Dacia would persist in going out alone; and not content with doing as she did in Dunkerque—that is, take the afternoons—she now rose early, and was out frequently before breakfast; this her mother considered most improper. Then there were days when she had no appetite and could not eat; besides that she looked so gloomy and miserable, that, as Mrs. Singleton said, it was enough to give any one a bilious attack to sit opposite to her.

Poor Dacia's trials seemed to be accumulating; but she looked on them all, in comparison with her one big trial, as pricks of pins to the thrust of a sword.

CHAPTER II.

THE LETTER.

MRS. EWART felt sadly perplexed about her niece ; she did not know what line to take with her. She saw her daily become more reserved. She heard Mrs. Singleton's complaints, and for the first time she thought, though they were made in a manner likely to irritate instead of soften matters, that there existed some grounds for them.

Mrs. Ewart had on one or two occasions endeavoured to draw Dacia out on the subject of Hugh Mostyn, but she had never yet succeeded in gaining one step near it. She still held one weapon untouched in her hand, that she knew, if all failed, must operate ; but she was very loth to make use of it. She still retained possession of the letter Mr. Mostyn had sent her. She had read it, and resolved on not giving it her niece. She fancied it could do no good, and might do

harm; but now she began to waver in this decision; she thought if it did nothing more, it would force her to speak; any thing, in short, seemed better than letting matters continue in their present state.

So one morning Mrs. Ewart sent a note to Dacia, asking her to go and lunch with her. In days of yore nothing made Dacia so happy as the prospect of spending a few hours alone with her aunt: but not so now; she shrank from all society, and she especially avoided, if possible, being alone with any one, more particularly Mrs. Ewart, whom—from her very affection for her—she dreaded more than others. But she went, nevertheless; indeed there seemed no escape for her, no excuse she could make that would in any degree seem plausible.

Luncheon was over, and they were sitting in the drawing-room, Dacia sketching a large wiry-haired deer-hound—thoughtlessly, I am inclined to think—on a scrap of paper that happened to lie on the table beside her, whilst Mrs. Ewart was racking her brain how to word what she wished to say, and above all in what way to begin

it. At last her own straightforward fashion of coming at once to the point, without making use of any roundabout ways, seemed to be the best, and so she began :

“ I asked you here to-day, dear Dacia, for a specific purpose ; I asked you to come in order to speak to you of Mr. Mostyn.”

Dacia started and looked up, her face turning pale, and her lips parting, as if she were about to reply ; but she did not speak ; she merely pushed the paper she had been sketching on on one side, and twisted the pencil round and round in her fingers. Mrs. Ewart went on :

“ After you left Dunkerque Mr. Mostyn asked to see me, and asked me to listen, Dacia, to what my heart ached to hear. You can understand how bitterly I grieved for you ; how I longed to be by your side, to comfort you, to soothe you, to lighten the heavy sorrow I knew you must be enduring. I felt half inclined to reproach you for not having confided in me yourself, in not having told me what it was I saw so well was weighing you down ; but I thought, when I returned to England with your mother, you would—that you would break

through the ice you had bound yourself within, and have let me share your sorrow; but instead of that, I found you more cold, more reserved, more silent, and I fancied, dear, less affectionate towards me. You have seemed to avoid me, and—”

“No, no, Mum, I have never done that. I did not speak of the past to you because I felt it impossible; and I do not think I shall ever be able. I feel as if I should not.”

Dacia experienced, however, an intense longing to ask what Hugh Mostyn's object was in seeking her aunt and confiding his story to her; but she did not dare. It was not this time from her own natural disinclination to speak; but she had a terrible vision of the confessional before her, with Father Leigh from within probing her to the very quick, not as to her words alone, but her thoughts. She remembered well that he had told her how easily sins of thought were committed, and how they must be guarded against; but if unintentionally given way to, must still be acknowledged. Poor Dacia! she felt safe only in the oblivion and forgetfulness of the past; and to gain that she saw little chance, if she were to allow herself to

discuss it. And yet at that moment, strive as she would, she could not help craving to hear all he had said to her aunt

“You must endeavour to shake off this growing reserve, Dacia; it will not help you to battle with your sorrow; and after all, my child, you have perhaps yet a bright and happy future before you. Many have had worse trials than yours to contend with; and giving way, as you have done, is hardly fair by your mother. Remember, she knows nothing of the cause of your depression, and assigns your discontent to the difference between your sister’s circumstances and your own.”

A sad smile crossed Dacia’s face. Riches would not elate her any more than poverty would depress her. So she thought, at least; so think most young people who have not such a huge sorrow to contend with. Riches are valueless to the young.

“I know such a reason would be unworthy of you, Dacia; but your mother thinks otherwise, and I cannot undeceive her. You would not, I feel sure, wish her to know all that I now do; and though, as a rule, a child should have no secrets

from a parent, in this case I would not urge you against your will to confide in her. She might often pain you by uselessly discussing it; and I think it will be better you should try and occupy your mind with other things, and leave the past out of your daily thoughts as much as possible."

"That is what I wish to do, what I try to do."

Dacia thought her aunt somewhat contradictory in her arguments, but she did not say so.

"But you won't succeed, if you remain incessantly alone. You won't do it by going off on long rambling walks the first thing in the morning, with nothing but your memory as a companion. Besides, Dacia, if all else fail, you must call pride to your aid."

— "I don't know what has become of it, Mum; it has all left me, I think."

"Then duty must take its place. You owe a duty to your mother, and a certain duty to society; you are failing in both just at present. Look the matter well in the face, and then bravely exert yourself to crush a feeling that, as long as it lasts, will cause you sorrow. Look on him as dead."

“I can’t; I wish I could. It is worse, far worse than if he were dead.”

“How dreadfully contrary every thing seems to go in this world!” exclaimed Mrs. Ewart, more to herself than Dacia. “Of all people in the world for you to have had thrown in your path! I suppose if you went the world round, you could not find one whose position is more sad and unhappy.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“I wish to goodness there was some remedy for this sort of thing. It is dreadful to see any one so completely changed in every way as you are. I don’t know what to do, or what to say.”

Mrs. Ewart began once more to waver about giving her niece Hugh Mostyn’s letter; she began to doubt the wisdom of it; and yet it might call forth some feeling that would rouse her out of her present state, and any thing seemed better than that utter hopeless resignation. If it were Cecily she had to deal with instead of Dacia, it would be an easier, if a more aggravating task; but the truth was, Mrs. Ewart was unknowingly contending against a hidden enemy, whose influence had been at work within an hour or two of the blow

falling on Dacia that had so completely crushed her. She did not know what was acting so powerfully over her niece, that her very thoughts were under its control; but she was not long to be left in ignorance.

We generally do learn any thing that is likely to grieve us very quickly; something is sure to bring it out. Like an unsightly object, that we would go any distance rather than see, the first thing the eye falls on will sure to be it. And, as fate would have it, if there existed one subject in the wide world over which Mrs. Ewart's common sense ceased to have any influence, it was Roman Catholicism. She could not argue the question with any degree of reason, because temper interfered. On that point she and James Moncrieffe were sworn allies. I believe, but for that point, she and he would have kept up an incessant warfare for his not taking sufficient care of his wife; but by constantly dinning it into his ears, he had certainly improved since her stolen trip to Paris.

“Dacia, if Mr. Mostyn came to England, and happened to meet you, what should you do?”

"I don't know. Why do you ask? Did he tell you he was coming?"

"No, he did not."

"I would endeavour to avoid meeting him; but if I did, God would direct me how to act."

"If he wrote to you, what should you do?"

After a moment's pause, Dacia replied,

"I would not read his letter."

Mrs. Ewart now considered for a moment, and then said,

"I have a letter for you. He sent it me the night before I left Dunkerque. I only undertook to give it you on one condition—that I was to read it myself. I thought at first it would be useless to give it you; but I have changed my mind. There it is."

Mrs. Ewart took the letter out of her pocket, and handed it to Dacia.

"O, I dare not, I dare not!" she exclaimed, drawing back, as if fearing to trust herself too near it, or even to look at it, for she covered her face with her hands.

"There is nothing to fear in it. It makes a proposition, which I think you will reject; and

it was because I felt a conviction that you would reject it, but yet that the rejection might cost you pain, that I hesitated about giving it."

"I dare not take it, Mum; I dare not. Take it back; do not offer it to me."

"But, Dacia, this is childish. I would not give you any thing that was likely to cause you deeper sorrow. It is because you seem so hopeless and so careless of the future that I determined to give you this letter; for with it you can, if you choose, yet become Hugh Mostyn's wife."

Dacia looked up in blank amazement. It seemed as if she were in a dream, or had been in one during the last few weeks.

"Could yet become Hugh Mostyn's wife!"

She repeated the words after her aunt.

Mrs. Ewart again tendered her the letter. She took it now. Father Leigh for the moment was, so far as Dacia Singleton was concerned, as if he had never existed. And she read it through, quickly, hurriedly, yet without one word escaping her. A bright crimson spot mounted to both her cheeks, and then died away, leaving her paler than before from the very contrast.

"Mum, a month ago I would have accepted this proposition. I would have said 'Yes,' however counter to my feelings it might be in calmer moments; for I could not have resisted the temptation. But it is too late; I am no longer able to accept it."

"No longer able! What do you mean, Dacia?"

It was Mrs. Ewart's turn to feel astonished; but a foreshadowing of coming evil made her ask the question in fear.

"Were he to divorce his wife to marry me, I could not marry a divorced man."

Dacia's voice was thick and low, but Mrs. Ewart heard her.

"I do not understand you. You said this minute that a month ago you would gladly have done so. What difference is there between last month and this?"

"I have become a Roman Catholic."

Her voice was distinct now, at least to Mrs. Ewart's ears; the words sounded as clear as a bell.

"A Roman Catholic! Dacia, did I hear

aright? Tell me, child, my ears deceived me. For God's sake, spare me this sorrow! Say I misunderstood you, dear. It cannot be; it is impossible!"

Mrs. Ewart's voice and lips quivered with sudden but suppressed emotion. It was a terrible blow she was receiving.

"Dearest Mum, do not seem so pained; it has made me happy, so it ought not to cause you regret."

"Made you happy! Why, look at you! There is no need now to inquire why your health seems failing and your spirits broken; no need to ask why reserve has taken the place of candour, and indifference the place of affection. I know well the fruits of the teaching of those who are misguiding you; I know well the fearful means they take to gain their ends. Why, Dacia, how did this happen, and when?"

Dacia told her aunt, in simple plain words, both how and when it happened; but she told it shortly. Mrs. Ewart was bitterly grieved. It was more than grief she felt; she felt anger, indignation, sorrow, astonishment, disappointment,

all combined. It was a subject she felt very deeply on, though one she seldom had occasion to discuss; and, as I said before, when she did so, it was unreasonably done.

“Does Cecily know of this?” said Mrs. Ewart, fancying she might have been at the bottom of it; and if she were, it would only be what would seem to her a natural thing for her to have taken up.

“No.”

“And your mother?”

“No; you are the first to whom I have told it.”

“It is just the thing Cecily might have done; I should not have been surprised; but you, Dacia,—you, with your clear judgment, your good sense,—it seems almost beyond belief. O Dacia, give up this sentimental folly; it is nothing else. It is not religion; it is a mockery to call it such. In your sorrow you have been led away by what you found soothing to the senses. The pageantry and pomp of their so-called religion attracted you; and then that man was there, like the evil one, prowling about seeking whom he might devour,

and he pounced on you as a hawk does on a poor helpless bird; and you—without resistance, without one attempt at escape from his clutches—fell into his hands an easy and willing prey. Had your poor father been alive, it would have gone far to break his heart. And, Dacia, you don't mean to pretend you believe all the dogmas of their idolatrous faith?"

"I try to believe all, as I *do* believe I ought. Some points seem difficult of belief; but it will come, but not by arguing it. Dear Mum, let us talk of something else."

"Talk of something else! What else do you think I could talk of? You can take it lightly, Dacia, because as yet you are blinded to the misery you are with terrible certainty laying up in store for yourself. Why, the sad episode in your life in connection with Hugh Mostyn I look on as trifling and passing, to the bitter sorrow you will endure if you persist in this mad infatuation of a belief that is no belief. I do not believe a Roman Catholic exists who believes in the tenets of what he calls his Church. I would rather see you Hugh Mostyn's wife, though his first marriage

were but broken by man's laws and not God's will, than the tool of a designing priest. O Dacia, my heart is full to bursting at the thought of you, my dear, dear child, becoming what I have known so many to become who have fallen into the same fatal errors ; you, who are the dearest being in all the world to me ! It will be the greatest trial of my life. Give me some word of hope ; tell me you will take time to consider all the points, all the questions, that have been argued and refuted by wiser heads than ours. Take your Bible, make it your guide ; promise me this at all events, and I shall yet hope to see you cast off a religion that was barely fitted for the darkest ages of ignorance and superstition."

"I will promise willingly to study my Bible."

"And will you take some books I will give you, and read them also?"

"Yes, I will take them," said Dacia, who could promise to take them, but did not dare say she would undertake to read them. Father Leigh had strictly enjoined her to read no controversial books, which these she took for granted

were. Mrs. Ewart, however, did not notice the equivocal answer.

“Dacia, your mother must be told of this. You must tell her of the terrible step you have taken.”

“Not yet, Mum ; wait a few days.”

“But not longer. Remember, she is your mother, and what is due to her ; though under your present teaching, I know how little real duty is inculcated. And what answer will you send Mr. Mostyn ?”

“I can send none.”

“You had better tell him the truth.”

“The truth ! O no, no, Mum ; do not let him know any thing !” and the tears filled Dacia’s soft pleading eyes, and fell in large drops down her pale cheek. Was it a feeling of shame crept over her at the thought of his learning she had adopted a religion which, with his knowledge of foreign lands, and of Italy especially, he must be fully aware would entail the deepest thoughts of her heart being dragged to the surface and laid bare ; which would lead to her love for him, and his for her, being made the subject of discussion with

another man, who, beneath the pretended sanctity of priesthood, would claim the right of diving down into the recesses of her most hidden sacred feelings. It was not exactly in this light Mrs. Ewart viewed Dacia's reluctance to let Mostyn learn the step she had taken ; but she was not far from it.

To change the religion of our fathers and our country is not, or ought not, to be done lightly ; and those who take such a step hastily, and without long and deep study, do so from outward circumstances, and not from inward conviction. Mrs. Ewart knew this was Dacia's case ; she knew full well hers was not a mind to accept the precepts of the Church of Rome easily ; she felt sure that it was the very dread of conviction being rendered utterly impossible that made her refuse to argue on the subject ; and she also knew the natural obstinacy and tenacity of Dacia's disposition, which might be brought to bear for good as well as evil, if judiciously and wisely directed. But there was that gigantic and powerful engine, the confessional, which gave her opponents such unbounded power, such tremendous influence, and

above all, the first word, that she feared, without some unseen means, she would fail in rescuing her from their clutches.

She sat and thought all this before replying to Dacia, and then she said,

“I was intending to return this letter, saying I had not given it to you ; but now I cannot do that. I must tell him you have read it ; and I think some answer is necessary, however simple and short you choose to make it.”

“Then tell him I feel on the subject as he said he has hitherto done, and that—we must not meet again—and tell him I—will pray for him always.”

Dacia's voice faltered and her lips quivered as she spoke, and Mrs. Ewart was about to say something gentle and tender, when the last few words changed her feelings in a moment from sorrow to indignation.

“If you intend praying for him to the saints, you may save yourself the trouble ; I don't think he would be much benefited by it.—But I will not say another word to-day on the subject. I hardly know whether I feel most angry or most miserable.”

But when Dacia had gone home, Mrs. Ewart had no difficulty in deciding which feeling was the strongest. She was utterly broken down by it, and spent the evening in thinking, till she was worn out, what her best plan of action would be. She was a woman who could not sit quietly over a trouble, and let matters take their course; she must be up and doing; and if she failed, she always had the comfort of feeling she had done her best to avert evil.

To rescue Dacia from the hands of the priests was her object. As to the religion, she considered there was none amongst them, as she accepted the word. Their pretended belief gave them power over mankind only inferior to the Deity; for they became the possessors of every thought and feeling of those they came in contact with, which enabled them to work out their ends either for private or public purposes.

They saw and read the heart of man as only God saw it; they knew the character and disposition of those who confessed to them better far than the individuals themselves. All this she knew, and much more; but what she did not

know—what none know but those who learn either by personal experience, or by making books their study that no woman could handle without bearing a stain on her purity for ever after, but which are the instructions given to all priests, whether young or old, who are confessors, was, the complete undermining of all modesty, the blunting of the sharp sensitiveness of woman's delicacy, the familiarising the mind to sin by the incessant and ever-recurring questions as to whether such and such errors had been committed.

Had Mrs. Ewart known all—had she had the vaguest suspicions of what Dacia had been subjected to, and that notwithstanding she had remained firm in her determination to retain and adhere to her newly-adopted faith—she would have given up in despair.

CHAPTER III.

BATTLING IN VAIN.

THE season was at its height and London was full. Carriages were rolling about from three in the afternoon till three in the morning. Bond-street was impassable ; to attempt to cross it on foot was a serious undertaking and somewhat a dangerous one. The only safe way of accomplishing it was by calling a policeman to one's aid : this at last was done by an unfortunate group that had congregated at the bottom of Conduit-street—almost the worst spot for crossing in the whole length of Bond-street. Mrs. Singleton, who had been standing there some ten minutes, but apart from the common mass—she did not like herding with the mob—seeing a forced passage being made, took advantage of it and crossed over with the rest ; she then continued her way down Bruton-

street, across Berkeley-square, and so on to Hertford-street.

“My daughter is at home, is she not?” she asked on reaching Mrs. Moncrieffe’s house.

“No, ma’am, Mrs. Moncrieffe is out.”

“Is Miss Singleton here?”

“No, ma’am, she is not.”

“But she has been here?”

“I will inquire, ma’am, if you will walk in. I did not open the door to her.”

Miss Singleton had not been at her sister’s; and her mother, slightly uneasy—for Dacia when she went out said she was going to see Cecily—was about to return home, when her eldest daughter came in.

“Why, mamma, this is a wonderful hour to see you at. Did you walk here?”

“You might see that, Cecily, by the state I am in. What with the heat and the dust, and the dreadful crowd, I am quite knocked up. But you are like Dacia; you never see, or never notice, whether I am well or ill.”

“Well, mamma, you can’t be very ill to have walked here. But don’t go; stay and have luncheon, and then you can drive home.”

"But I cannot think what has become of Dacia: she left home early this morning, and said she should come here; yet the servants tell me she has not been here at all to-day."

"O, don't fidget about Dacia; she can take care of herself. She has become so horribly gloomy and proper lately, that it is quite tiresome, and gives one the blues to look at her. Take your bonnet off, and sit quietly in the back drawing-room till luncheon is ready; it is cooler there than any where else. I will go and take my own off, and be down directly."

Cecily Moneriette looked very pretty when she reappeared. She had on a white dress, and looked so fresh and cool, that her mother said on seeing her:

"You are enough to give one a chill looking at you, Cis. I can't think what possesses you to wear white; it makes you look like a girl instead of a married woman; you look younger than Dacia."

"As to Dacia, she might be my grandmother, if gravity gave age; but I like to look younger,—the younger the better. Mamma, I am expecting

a visitor presently ; one you know—Henry Marsden. He has arrived at last ; James saw him at the club last night, and he said he was coming to see me to-day.”

“Is not that poor young man dead yet?”

“Well, it seems not. But what has delayed his return so long I don’t know, for May was the month he spoke of being back in ; however, it seems he has been at home for a week or two, taking advantage, I suppose, of this hot weather to be in the north. I wish he would marry Dacia.”

“I am afraid Dacia is not likely to marry ; her best days are going by, and she won’t go out ; she says she does not like society, though I am sure she made fuss enough about it at Dunkerque, and, if I had let her, would have gone every where, leaving me at home ill and alone. But she always was selfish ; her father made her so. Have you your salts there, Cecily ? I have left my bottle at home, and my head is aching a little.”

Mrs. Moncrieffe sent upstairs for her smelling-bottle ; and Mrs. Singleton, whether it did her good or not, felt more at home with it in her hand.

Luncheon was over, and Cecily began to feel bored. She never was happy without present amusement, or some excitement in prospect. She thought her mother's visit did capitally to fill up the gap between her own return home and the arrival of her expected guest. She was what she had never been before—anxious to see Mr. Marsden. She had taken it into her head that it would be a famous thing to bring about a match between him and her sister, and she pictured to herself every variety of amusement such an event would give rise to; and amusement was Cecily's god.

No amount of gaiety seemed to tire her; admiration seemed her daily food; and flirting—innocent, foolish flirting—her very life. She was just about, however, to propose to her mother that they should wait no longer, when Mr. Marsden was announced. With a little fluttering fussy manner Mrs. Moneriette welcomed him, telling him he was looking so much better, that she would hardly have known him.

Of course she neither thought nor cared much about his state; or had she, she might have seen he was very much the same as he was eight

months back : not any worse, not any better. There was the same hollow cheek, the same brilliancy of eye, and the same projection, which gives somewhat a staring expression, or as if the eye were strained to see something at a distance ; the pale lips, and that sunken look in the chest so painful to behold. He returned both ladies' greetings warmly ; there was perhaps more cordiality towards Mrs. Moncrieffe, and more reserve towards Mrs. Singleton ; but then personally the latter was almost a stranger to him. He gave a rapid glance round the room ; but the one he sought was not there ; and then they fell into the ordinary conversation his long absence gave rise to.

“Are you a passing visitor, Mrs. Singleton, or are you residing in London ?” asked Marsden, thinking he might now, without any very observable anxiety, make such inquiries as would lead to news of her youngest daughter.

“I hardly know,” replied Mrs. Singleton. “My health drove me away from Dunkerque, and I came to London simply because it seemed the best place to go to any other from. And my state is so precarious, that I do not think we shall actu-

ally settle down here permanently. Besides, I am a poor widow, you know, Mr. Marsden ; and it requires a good income to live here in any degree of comfort."

"Mamma, how can you talk so! You are not too poor to live any where you like. I think for the winter, however, you will do wisely to go to a warm climate.—Don't you think so, Mr. Marsden?"

"I do indeed," he replied, his face brightening up. "Will you, Mrs. Singleton? Come to Cannes. What a delightful chance it would be for me! it is such a comfort to find friends away from home that we have known in our own country. I am resolved to go to Cannes again this winter ; I find the climate so much drier than Pau, and more sheltered than Nice ; and I am quite sure you would like the place, and that it would agree with you, if a bright warm sun and blue sky is what you want."

"It is what every one wants, I think ; but Cannes is a long way off—a long journey to undertake. I hardly think I could make up my mind to it ; I have travelled so little, and been so

unaccustomed to knocking about, that I think I should never get there, were I even to set out."

"Let me be your escort, Mrs. Singleton; I will make a capital courier, and undertake to land you safely there, and with no trouble to yourself."

Mrs. Singleton gave a languid smile, and said, "I think the south of England will do well enough for me,—some retired spot in the country that is sheltered from the cold winds."

"Nonsense, mamma; you would never live in the country. You would soon get tired of the sameness and dulness, and nothing but wretched, stupid, out-of-date novels to read, newspapers two days old, no visitors but the clergyman, or some stray neighbour, who would bore you more than amuse you. You know you must not think of a country life, as you had it at Christchurch; that is a different sort of thing, though I think that was enough to vapour one to death."

"Besides, Mrs. Singleton," joined in Henry Marsden, "you have no idea how weary one becomes of beautiful scenery, if no interest beyond looking at it exists. One may get through a few months alone in one's own place; but after that,

with even the attraction of seeing the property improving under one's personal directions, it becomes tediously monotonous and insufferably dull."

"You certainly do not either of you draw a cheerful picture, or one likely to induce me to try a country life. At the same time beggars cannot be choosers."

"They can in certain cases," laughingly replied Marsden.

"Of course they can, if they are beggars like mamma," said Mrs. Moneriette.

"What made you ever think of the country I cannot imagine, unless to make Dacia more gloomy than she is already; and I am sure that is not needed."

"At last," thought Marsden, "I shall hear something of her.—I hope Miss Singleton is well," he said aloud. "Is she with you in town?"

"Yes, and very well," said Mrs. Singleton. "I am surprised she is not here.—Cecily, do you think any thing can have happened to your sister?" And Mrs. Singleton closed her eyes as she inhaled an amount of ammonia that would have suffocated any one else.

“Happened! Why, what could have happened? —It seems, when my sister went out this morning, she told mamma she was coming here; but she must have changed her mind, as she has not yet appeared.” This latter part of her speech Mrs. Moncrieffe addressed to Henry Marsden, who looked inquiringly and anxiously when Mrs. Singleton spoke. “She will be punished, however, for her wanderings, for she will be dreadfully disappointed at not seeing you. But will you come and dine with us on Thursday, Mr. Marsden? And mamma and Dacia will come and meet you; won’t you, mamma?”

“Yes, my dear, with pleasure,” said Mrs. Singleton. “I must go home now, Cis; I have one or two things that require my attention this afternoon.”

“Wait a minute, mamma, and I will drive you home.—You will come, Mr. Marsden, Thursday?”

“With great pleasure. But I have been keeping you at home, I am afraid, Mrs. Monerietfe; and this beautiful weather it is doubly cruel. I daresay you have wished me at the North Pole this last half hour.”

“I could not be quite so unkind. It would be better even to wish you at Jericho than there ; you would at any rate be warm,” said Mrs. Moncrieffe laughing. “Can I take you any where ? it is too hot for walking.”

“No, many thanks ; I am going to pay another visit in this neighbourhood, and then I am going to drive down to Richmond, where I dine.”

“I wish I were going to do the same ; I think Richmond and Greenwich dinners delightful.”

“Let us make a party for one day next week,” said Marsden, wishing the two ladies farewell.

“We can talk about it on Thursday. I shall like it above all things.”

“I think he still has a lingering fancy for Dacia,” continued Mrs. Moncrieffe, as soon as her visitor was beyond hearing. “I daresay it might be brought about.”

“O Cis, you do not know Dacia, or you would not talk about bringing any thing about that she did not herself choose.”

“But she would be silly in the extreme to refuse Henry Marsden.”

“Perhaps so; but that is no reason why she should not do so. However, we may as well wait till she has the chance before we talk about it; my own opinion is, that he does not dream of such a thing,”

“Well, the horses must be baked and the carriage too in all this sun,” said Cis, now anxious to be off. “We had better go whilst we have the chance, or some one else will be calling and will keep us still longer.”

So some one did, and another half hour elapsed before they got away. However, at last they were off.

As Henry Marsden walked slowly and thoughtfully down Hertford-street towards the Park, he wondered how it was Miss Singleton could be out and alone, and no one know any thing about her; and then he thought, instead of paying his intended visit in Park-lane, he would have ample time to drive down to Woburn-place. He should like to call on Mrs. Ewart, and perhaps he might find Miss Singleton there. As he reached the corner of the street, he stood irresolute a moment, considering whether he should turn his steps back

again, when he saw Dacia Singleton on the opposite side, waiting to cross.

There was no hesitation now as to which way he should go. In half a minute he was by Dacia's side. A startled blush mounted to her cheeks, and for a moment made her look more like her former self; but it quickly died away, and she then appeared to him as a reflection of the bright beautiful girl he parted from, and who sent him forth, but nine months ago, dreaming, and visionary, and hopeful.

"This is indeed unexpected, Miss Singleton. Not five seconds ago I was thinking of you, and little more than five minutes since I was speaking of you."

Warmly and without restraint did Dacia greet Henry Marsden, and then she asked him when he had arrived.

"In England, six weeks ago; in London, last week only. And you see, Miss Singleton, we meet again in old England, notwithstanding your fear that you were leaving it for ever perhaps."

"Mamma's health was the immediate cause

of our return. Dunkerque did not agree with her."

"And as little with you, I am afraid. You are not looking well."

"But I am so; and I am glad to see you looking so much better."

"Then I suppose Dunkerque does agree with me."

"Were you there?"

"For a whole month."

Dacia did not ask what took him there. She knew there could be but two causes, — herself, or Hugh Mostyn. She wondered when she would be delivered from temptation; for it seemed as if she no sooner escaped from one than she fell into another. It was hard. She wished to do rightly and think rightly; but every one appeared leagued against her so as to prevent it. How was it possible she should rein-in her thoughts, and prevent them galloping off to forbidden subjects, when those very subjects were placed in her way, right across her path? She must come against them, if she went on at all; and how could she stay thought as long as life kept it in motion?

Her aunt, her mother, and now Henry Marsden, talked on subjects that must inevitably keep up the memory of the last few months in all its freshness. She had only then just passed through a fiery ordeal, from whence she was told she came out free from spot or blemish of sin; and yet before she reached home fresh stains were to rise on the surface, to remove which she knew well their existed but the one same terrible remedy, the bare thought of which sent a cold chill to her heart.

“I was on my way to my sister’s,” said Miss Singleton, after an awkward though momentary pause, and *apropos* of nothing.

“I have but just left her and Mrs. Singleton,” said Marsden. “Your mamma was in some anxiety about you; for she expected to have found you at Mrs. Moncrieffe’s, and not doing so, seemed to wonder where you could be.”

“O, I went first to see a friend the other side of the Park,” said Dacia hastily and confused. “I did not know mamma intended going to my sister’s to-day.”

The old doubts, imbibed through his friend

Mostyn, of women collectively, for a moment came across Henry Marsden ; but his infatuation for Dacia drove it away instantaneously. Yet Dacia's manner would have caused less suspicious men than himself to have fancied something more than an ordinary visit had occupied her time.

"I think you will find them out. I believe I was the cause, as it was, of detaining them at home longer than they intended."

"Then, in that case, I will go straight home. Good-bye, Mr. Marsden."

"Let me walk with you a little way," he said. "I was just meditating a visit to Mrs. Ewart, but I think now I have barely time, and must postpone it till to-morrow ; therefore, if you will allow me to accompany you, you will enable me to pass a very pleasant ten minutes, instead of sitting at home waiting till it is time to fulfil a dinner engagement at Richmond."

They walked on together, Dacia nothing loth to have him a little longer with her, for she hoped quite as much as she feared, that he would tell her something of Hugh ; something of his daily life ; of how he had passed his time since that terrible

day when they were united for one brief moment, but the more completely to be parted. And both hopes and fears were fulfilled.

Henry Marsden was one of those who not only thought but experienced, as far as he had gone in life, that a true heart admitted of but one friendship, as of but one love ; and as he felt—at all events for the present—that it was impossible to talk on the one topic, he naturally fell back on the other, as being the most congenial to his own feelings, and one that they both had in common.

During that walk Dacia was led away for the time being from her false to her own true self again. The hard cold indifference to all things and all people she had endeavoured to assume was broken through, and her interest in worldly matters once more gained its natural ascendancy. For a short half hour she lived in the past ; she found there was yet something in the world to interest her—in that world she had done her utmost to close out from her for ever.

She heard of Mostyn being the same in outward bearing as she had first known him to be,

—stern, cold, and haughty, unloved and unloving ; and she was gratified.

“ He is like a being from another world amongst that Dunkerque set ; there is not one man in the place that understands his disposition, not one with whom he could become intimate, not one but what he seems to feel a certain contempt for. Poor Hugh ! how I grieve for him ! I wish he would throw up his consulship, cut the whole thing, and knock about the world with me for a time. But he is not a man to do that ; he would not be satisfied without employment. Fortunately he has a depth of resource within himself which prevents his wanting society ; and if he does take it into his head to wish for conversation, he has Sancho.”

“ Dear old Sancho ! I never asked about him,” said Dacia.

“ O, he is the same grand independent fellow he always was. Sancho could not change. He and Mostyn render each other’s life endurable. I think to see Sancho sitting with his long-pointed nose resting on the table, with his intelligent eyes watching Hugh’s every motion, is worth any thing ;

and then, when no movement disturbs him, his falling asleep in the same attitude. One astonishing point in that dog is, that he knows how to distinguish good from evil, that is, true from double-faced people. I could tell you a wonderful story of Sancho, of his inveterate unconquerable dislike to one who afterwards proved the sagacity of his judgment, but it would entail the talking over affairs of other people, which I have no right to do." Then, after a moment's pause, he added, "Mostyn has promised to spend the first fortnight in September with me in my northern home. I hope he will not disappoint me." Finding again no answer, he said, "I am to meet you at dinner, Miss Singleton, on Thursday."

"Are you? Where?"

"At Mrs. Moncrieffe's; at least I hope you will not refuse to carry out Mrs. Singleton's promise for you to that effect."

"O no; but I hope my sister has no party."

"You are not fond of society?" asked Henry Marsden.

"Not what is termed society; I do not think I do," said Miss Singleton, who for the last few

minutes could think of nothing beyond the fact that Hugh Mostyn was probably coming to England; and was now wishing Mr. Marsden to leave her, that she might set to work with busy thought and form some plan to escape a meeting. But one presented itself; one that had been already placed before her as being the safest and most fitting step—under her singular circumstances—that could be adopted.

As they reached the end of George-street, Hanover-square, where Mrs. Singleton was living, a carriage drove round the corner of Conduit-street with a lady in it, who in a moment caught sight of the two. She leaned forward, bowed and smiled, and kissed the tips of her fingers. Henry Marsden, without seeming to see the recognition, immediately shook hands with Miss Singleton, and left her, saying, she was so close at home he would not go further. Dacia bowed coldly to the lady in the carriage. It was the Countess Langen.

CHAPTER IV.

MARIA, COUNTESS LANGEN.

ALL seemed to go smoothly with the Countess Langen. The current of her life never appeared to meet with any obstacles; it ran quickly and merrily on, and—that which would please most women, and especially herself—she found the London world at her feet.

This was now her second season in London, and, if possible, it was gayer than the first. She accepted more invitations; she seemed to be less disinclined to go every where than she had been on her husband's first coming to England. Then she was more particular; she asked who she was likely to meet; she rarely went to mere political or diplomatic receptions; but this dislike to general society wore off in time, and she had now quite got over it.

And yet withal she seemed far from being

a happy woman ; there was at times an anxious look in her face painful to see. Much of her brilliant gaiety was evidently assumed ; and when alone and unobserved, she would sit and think for hours together, and invariably after one of these solitary *tête-à-têtes* with reflection, she was nervous and irritable.

Amongst all her friends, Mrs. Moncrieffe was the only one she appeared really to like, and the only one who had the free *entrée* to her house on any day and any hour. The liking was and continued to be mutual ; and all Cecily's little troubles, all her wishes, her likes and dislikes, were poured into the willing—and always sympathising—ear of Countess Langen. Yet Cecily knew nothing of her friend's private affairs or history. It seemed to be understood her parents were dead ; that she was an only child ; and that both her father and mother had been only children, which therefore saved her from any troublesome relations. And she had no English friends, apart from those made since she came to England two years ago, having lived on the Continent from early childhood.

Count Langen, more like an Englishman than our usual conception of foreigners, was a Norwegian by birth. Tall, fair, broad-shouldered, and honest-looking, he gave one the idea of being incapable of an untruth or deception, and therefore of being as unfit for a diplomatist as any man could well be. However, his very straightforwardness at times enabled him to gain ends that diplomatic means might have caused to fail. He was very much attached to his wife; he met her in his own country, where, through an accident from falling over some rocks, her husband was killed, and she left a widow; and after a short acquaintance he proposed, and they were married. At her request, he endeavoured to obtain a post in America, but he failed, and was sent instead to England, as First Secretary of Legation. He spoke English thoroughly, and individually he had no regret in being there instead of across the Atlantic.

One day—the day following that on which Henry Marsden had called on Mrs. Moneriette—the Countess was sitting with her drawing-room full of guests, when her husband walked

in somewhat unexpectedly; for he rarely was visible in the afternoon, especially on Tuesdays—the day he generally found the busiest in the whole week—which this happened to be.

“Maria, I must interrupt you for a moment,” he said, having spoken a word to each person present. “I have just received an offer of being moved to New York as *Chargé d’Affaires*; shall I accept it?”

“Well, George,” exclaimed his wife in surprise, “this is news! Accept it? Well, I suppose so; what do you think? When did you hear of it?”

“Not half an hour ago. And I have a great deal of business to get through; so if I am to say ‘yes’ to this offer, I must write my acceptance of it with the despatches that leave to-night.”

“Well, let me think it over a little, George,” replied the Countess, beginning to hesitate. “After all, it is not well to make up one’s mind in a moment on so important a matter,” she added, turning to a lady by her side, the wife of an ambassador.

“No,” she replied, “and still less when you are not alone. I shall, therefore, wish you *au revoir*, and leave you to talk the question over with the Count; though I sincerely hope you will remain where you are.”

All followed her example, and in a few minutes the Countess Langen found herself alone with her husband.

“You were so anxious to go to America, Maria, when we were first married, that I fancied you would have jumped at the chance now, especially as it gives me a step.”

“I was, George, then; for I dreaded England with its fogs, and the English with their cold formal manners; but I seem to have become accustomed to both now; or perhaps it is that they are neither of them so bad as I thought they would be.”

“Well, then, I am to refuse it, am I?”

“No,” she replied, smiling; “don’t be in such a hurry. Give me till six o’clock. Shall you be at home then; or shall I send down to the Legation a ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

“Send to me; I cannot possibly be at home

at that hour. There is a great deal to get through this afternoon."

"You will be home to dinner?"

"Yes, but let it be at eight."

"You know to-night is the ball at the Palace."

"So it is—how provoking! However, it can't be helped. Very well, then, we will leave it so—you will send down to me."

It was a serious question for the Countess Langen to decide, and she knew its importance. Not from the advantage that would accrue to her husband if they went, or the reverse if he refused it; but to herself. Would her life be freer from anxiety? would she have less care, less occasion for wariness, less need for caution? She hardly knew. Security had now pretty well succeeded to her former fears; and yet if she left England and went to another country—that country, too, which resembled somewhat an international exhibition, as far as meeting people from all lands went—might she not be going from the peaceful bay into the storm-tossed sea? She thought it seemed like it. However, before deciding, she resolved on paying a visit to Mrs.

Moncrieffe; and, without waiting for her carriage, she sent for a cab and drove there at once, desiring her carriage to follow.

Mrs. Moncrieffe was not at home. People never are when you want them; and always are when you do not. This *contre-temps* seemed to render it doubly necessary for the Countess to see Cecily. She, and no one else, could tell her that which would decide her on this all-important matter. So, resolving to wait her return home, she was shown into the drawing-room.

The sun was coming in through the shadeless windows, with all the thick heavy heat it generally favours London with in hot summer weather. Countess Langen had placed herself with her back to the window; and beginning to feel intensely warm, she rose to draw down the blind, and also to change her seat.

As she leaned forward to reach the blind, over a writing-table that stood just before the open window, and of course blocking up direct access to it, her sleeve swept the blotting-book off the table; and as it fell, a whole bevy of notes and scraps of paper lay strewed on the carpet.

“How stupid!” she exclaimed half-aloud; and then stooping down, her lithe fingers quickly gathered up the scented *billets-doux*. One, however, neither scented nor small, as she held it for a moment before placing it back in the book, arrested her attention. The handwriting was clearly familiar to her, but it seemed not to call forth pleasing recollections. Her cheeks slightly paled beneath the delicate tinge of rose that was ever stationary on them, and her brow contracted, giving her handsome face almost a fiendish expression.

“My worst enemy! Why has he been left in this world so long? Surely he would be no loss; and O, what a gain to me if I knew his tongue was for ever silenced, and his eye was never again to meet mine! I thought he was not in London, till I saw him with Miss Singleton the other day—and he did not choose to see me!”

She looked at it once more, and then keeping it apart from the others, she—when the blotting-book was again in its place, and its contents gathered up—slowly took the letter out of its cover and read it. There was not much to read;

a few lines scrawled in Marsden's untidy big writing; but they were enough to produce a wonderful change in Madame la Comtesse. She dropped it out of her hands, and clasping them together, cried out,

"Thank God! thank God! At last. O, how I have prayed for this!"

For a few minutes she seemed totally overcome—whether by joy in its pure sense seemed doubtful; and yet her words might lead one to think there was little alloy mixed with it. Once again she took up the note, and read it three, four times over, weighing and pondering each word. Now her expression changed; it might be a mistake—a false alarm; then again hope reasserted itself, and conviction quickly followed.

A wonderful varying face had the Countess; she could almost be beautiful and hideous within the same minute. Her countenance was made up of expression, which generally she could pretty well keep under control; it was but when utterly alone she permitted herself the luxury of giving way to what she actually felt.

"What should I care for Henry Marsden, if

these words penned by himself prove true? His heart may sorrow—so let it. I would give something to see him writhing beneath the sharp pangs of a broken heart. O that I knew how to torture him! How I should revel in his agonies! But my time may come, any way, *now*—with this, I can afford to bide it.”

There was no need any longer to wait for Mrs. Moncrieffe. She knew already as much as she could tell her, and much more than she had expected to learn. Her decision was made; no need now to weigh the pros and cons for their leaving England; the latter ceased to exist: at least she thought the balance so greatly in favour of the former, that it needed no further consideration; and ringing the bell, she inquired whether her carriage had come. It was waiting.

Better if it had not; better had she had to wait a little longer, and so have seen Mrs. Moncrieffe. Cis might have let drop a few little words that would have turned the whole current of her friend's life; they might have caused her to cross the broad open sea, but that would have saved her the fearful wreck she encountered ashore. They

might have brushed away the blossoming hopes that were so rapidly opening into certainties in her breast ; but they would have left her free from the toils which, by remaining where she was, were being fatally woven around her.

But she hurried away, longing to get home and let her husband know that she wished to give up all further thoughts of going to America.

Vanity had been the curse of Countess Langen's life. Not weak vanity, not that vanity that makes the maiden a coquette and the wife a flirt, but the vanity that will make the young girl a jilt and the woman dishonour her husband ; the vanity that drives on, never letting go its hold till it reaches the brink of disgrace and shame, and then lets its victim fall with an awful crash, down, down, till time alone obliterates its memory.

To feed her vanity, Madame Langen would have been guilty of any falsity to her friend. To gain away an admirer from another woman—whether she were maid, wife, or widow, to her was alike—she would have stooped to any baseness. She possessed the vanity that owns no kinship with prudence ; affection had never stood in

her way, neither as feeling it for others, nor working on herself. Pity she had none for mortal being, unless her husband: perhaps she liked him better than any other man breathing; his good honest heart had lavished a world of love on her, and there was a sensation—if not feeling—for him in return. She had a knack of assuming innocence and ignorance so naturally, that he never doubted one-half second her loyalty to him in thought, word, or deed. Since she had been his wife, her deeds had not been very evil—in one sense. She had religiously kept her troth to him; but fear, not love, had deterred her from actual wrong.

As she ran upstairs to her boudoir to write off a few lines to send him, her heart beat with a strange delight as she recalled Henry Marsden's letter; every word of it was stamped on her memory. She indulged in all sorts of wild hopes. She was at last to have peace; at last she would be able to go out and come in without fear and trembling. Her heart need no longer beat if she heard a footfall with a clear ringing sound echoing behind her in the street. Her eyes need no

longer wander cautiously round a room on first entering it, to ascertain none she would not meet were present.

O, it was a blessed time Maria Langen pictured to herself for the future! How often when we anticipate pleasure do we realise it? How often when we seek peace do we find it? How often when we sketch out plans do we fulfil them? How often do we foresee truthfully? How often do we read coming events aright, even with the past to guide and help us? Never, I trow. We are too apt to take a bright side; we give every thing the shade of colouring that will suit our tastes the best. We think as we hope, and so we think all awrong. The future is one mighty blank, that all are at liberty to sketch over; and so one *croquis* after another is laid on, till it forms a jumbling, unintelligible mass, that only becomes clear by time marching on events, and wiping away man's fictions for God's facts.

Strange how humanity invariably errs. How weary one is of that cry,—a cry uttered by every man breathing at one time or another of his life,—“I tried to do my best, but I failed.” Of course

he failed ; we all fail. Even when it is wrong that we try our hand at, and when that all-powerful gentleman—the devil—is at our backs to help us, we succeed none the better. We may go a certain length, but no further. A barrier, as impenetrable and invisible as heaven is to man in his mortal flesh, stays our progress.

So far, and no further, may we go ; and that far is generally quite enough ; it as a rule leads us to ruin : there is so little we do ourselves, or try to bring about through our own instrumentality, that turns out for our welfare. Best never attempt any thing which depends on our weak, miserable humanity to carry through ; nothing is ever gained by it, unless regret, and the knowledge that we are no more able to stem the tide of fate than a frail bark can bear up against a whirlpool. Yet if we make use of and retain that knowledge during our after-lives, the once knocking our heads against the stone wall of destiny may not prove a fruitless folly. It may save us a broken heart, if it has once given us an aching one ; and then the lesson may have been worth the suffering. But it is the innate longing in every man's breast to im-

prove matters that prevents him quietly resigning himself to bear what he cannot help. He kicks against the pricks, and then the pricks sting more sharply than before. He thinks if he only does this and only does that, and brings the other about, all must yet be well. But is it so in the end? Never. Better in time accept the knowledge of our weakness, which then will help to make us strong.

CHAPTER V.

DISAPPOINTED HOPES.

AMIDST the entire gay and brilliant throng assembled at the Palace that evening none seemed more so than Maria Langen. She was looking beautiful, and she knew it—thus giving her the increased power of fascination; for nothing makes a woman so agreeable as feeling thoroughly satisfied with herself, more especially one of her temperament.

Having done her duty in the charmed circle of royalty, which in her heart she hated, she was now standing as far from it as she conveniently could, and surrounded by half a dozen men, all foreigners, who were each paying homage to her in their own fashion.

Foreigners have no objection to be in groups for this purpose; Englishmen prefer to have the field free from all other sportsmen; they like to

stand alone. However, for the Countess Langen herself there could not be too many; she liked numbers; the more she could attract, the greater sop was it to her vanity.

It was singular she and Cecily Moncrieffe had never clashed; but they never had. Though both owned the same weakness, it was of a totally different kind. Mrs. Moncrieffe cared not for numbers so much as for individuals, and she would be just as pleased at hearing a passing remark from a stranger as to her attractions as she would have been had the man gone down on his bended knees before her and uttered a whole string of compliments. Cecily was more English in her love of admiration; Maria Langen more foreign. Cecily was more conceited than vain—more a coquette than a flirt. She was light and frivolous, but not entirely heartless; she was selfish, but not mean-spirited. She would not try to injure another who had never done her any harm for the simple pleasure of indulging jealousy. She had even entertained an idea of making up a match for another—true, that other was her own sister; but Countess Langen could no more have endeavoured

to gain admiration for another woman, sister or no sister, than she could have deliberately sat down and submitted to have her long black tresses cropped by the hair-dresser's shears in order to make a wig to adorn a rival.

James Moncrieffe and his wife were amongst those who had been honoured with a command to be present at the ball to-night; and Cecily was pouting forth a request for the third time to her good-natured husband to take her in search of Madame Langen. He had warded off the disagreeable task as long as he could, but now Cis exclaimed:

"If you don't take me at once, I will ask some one else. Will you give me your arm for a few minutes?" she said, turning round to Baron Frewen, one of her cropped-headed admirers; "I am anxious to find Countess Langen."

"Here, take my arm, Cis; I will go with you," said James Moncrieffe, when he found he could not help himself; and he hated to see his wife hanging on one of those sallow-faced fools, as he thought them, and often called them.

"You will find Madame Langen at the far end

of the room ; if you see a group of men, try and penetrate into the midst of them—you are sure to find her there,” said Baron Frewen, who, though always ready to pay her the homage she required, was at heart neither a friend nor admirer of the Countess.

After threading their way slowly through the crowd, bowing to some, speaking to others, Cis and her husband reached the small circle where Maria Langen was holding her own court. Mrs. Monerieffe was known to be an intimate friend, and way was instantly made ; and when they had greeted each other, Cis turned to her husband and said : “ I don’t want you any more, James. If you are ready to go home before I am, wait for me just under that large picture ; and if I want you, I will get some one to find you.”

“ Thank you !” replied James ; “ you’re very kind ;” and he walked away, muttering, however, between his teeth, “ Damn all those fellows—and how I do hate that woman !”

After a little general conversation, Mrs. Monerieffe said, addressing herself alone to the Countess :

“What did you want this afternoon, Maria? I was so vexed on my return home to find you had been waiting for me; they told me you had not been gone five minutes when I got home.”

“It did not matter, dear, the least. I merely came to tell you a piece of news, not worth much, as it takes no effect; George had an offer made him of going as *Chargé d’Affaires* to New York.”

“Good gracious! you’re not going surely!” exclaimed Mrs. Moncrieffe in perfect dismay.

“No,” replied the Countess; “though of course it is a far better thing than what we have here.”

Half a dozen voices were raised against this assertion, all proving to the Countess that London was the best post in all the world, and that no amount of pay would remunerate a man for living amongst Yankees.

“I daresay you are all of you right,” she replied; “any way we have resolved to refuse, and remain where we are.”

“What are you going to do on Thursday, Maria?” asked Mrs. Moncrieffe.

“Morning, noon, or night, my dear?”

“O, neither; in the evening.”

“Nothing particular; perhaps go to the Opera for an hour or two; there will be plenty to do afterwards; for there are three places I am anxious to go to, if even I can only stay a few minutes at each.”

“How dreadfully gay you are this season! Last year you used to pretend to dislike going out; but this nothing satisfies you.”

Madame Langen smiled. “Like you, Cis, eh? I suppose you have inoculated me. But why did you ask about Thursday?”

“Because I thought, if you had nothing better to do, you might as well come and dine with us. Mamma and my demure sister are coming; they were coming to meet Mr. Marsden; and as I know your antipathy to him, I did not ask you before; but now he can’t come, so I want you to do so, or I shall be bored to death. You have no idea how dreadful Dacia has grown, and she is making herself quite plain with the way she is going on. Do come.”

“Very well. But what has come over your sister? She was such a bright happy-looking girl.”

“Heaven knows, unless she is in love. It’s the only way I can account for a person going on as she does.”

“Perhaps her first fancy for Mr. Marsden has revived on seeing him again, and is now ripening into something stronger.”

“Then I am sure,” said Cis, “if that is all, she need not look so gloomy, for he is very much in love with her, I am quite certain. No, I don’t think she cares a straw for him; I can’t help thinking it is some one she has met during her winter in Dunkerque. By the bye, that reminds me I wanted to tell you about Henry Marsden; he wrote me such a lachrymose scrawl yesterday, saying he had had a telegram from his dear friend at Dunkerque, requesting him to go over instantly to him—you know who his dear friend there is, of course?” The Countess nodded assent, and Mrs. Moneriette continued. “And he added, he felt sure there must be something serious the matter—he feared illness—or he never would have sent for him in such a hurry. Well, just fancy how delightfully disappointed he will be; for this morning my aunt, Mrs. Ewart, had a letter from a Miss

Chorley, who writes her periodical chapters of gossip, telling her their handsome sulky-looking Consul was throwing up his appointment, and this time the whole concern, as he was going to have nothing more to do with consulships, but was coming to England to live with his mother. Of course, therefore, instead of his dying as poor Marsden thought, he has sent for him to—Why, Maria, what is the matter? are you ill?”

The question was not uncalled for. A deadly pallor had overspread the Countess Langen's face, and her large dark eyes seemed starting from their sockets.

“Are you sure of this, Cecily? Are you sure that this Miss——Miss Shaw, or whatever her name may be, is right?”

“Well, of course I don't know for certain, but I should think so. But, Maria, what in the world does it matter to you?” she asked laughing. “You look so pale, you quite frightened me; do you think it is the heat? I am sure you are not well; let us go on the balcony a little; the night is very close, yet a breath of air may possibly make its way through the awning.”

“Yes, let us go there,” she replied, rising mechanically and following Mrs. Moncrieffe.

They had been alone during the last few minutes. One by one had the men dropped off. Mrs. Moncrieffe’s conversation being so pointedly addressed to the Countess, and the subject not interesting any of them, they sauntered away in search of something more amusing.

But one hour ago had Maria Langen been indulging in bright happy hopes of the future. A feeling of security and confidence had crept over her, and had already begun to take possession of her. It is so easy to turn possible chances into probable ones; and from that to undoubted certainty is but a very short leap, when our imagination happens to be in the least degree active.

Henry Marsden’s brain had conjured up nothing short of serious illness, simply because he had received a telegram from a friend whose usual method of proceeding was, in all circumstances, tempered by thought for others; Maria Langen’s brain had gone further still, and she settled that death only could result from what to you or me, reader, seems but a very common every-day occur-

rence. It showed thoroughly the two distinct positions; the one desponding, the other hopeful; but like all who invariably look to the rosy-coloured side of things, and, as a rule, believe what they wish to be as the most probable to occur, the awakening to the real state of things is very terrible. Then they see clearly the false brightness their own hopes gave, and the utter folly they have been guilty of, not alone in basking in a fictitious happiness, but perhaps by actions not to be undone, and words not to be unspoken, and blasted chances that might, had no human hand stirred, have yet brought about peace and happiness.

A dark heavy cloud seemed to be gathering over Maria Langen's head, that would slowly but surely envelop her in its fatal folds. She seemed to feel it increasing around her, and she for a moment almost wished, as she stood gazing at a cluster of brilliant flowers at her feet, that it might burst over her then and there, and do its worst.

But not long did she give way to this weakness. To prevent its bursting was what she must endeavour to do; or if it did, then to stand the shock bravely, and try and recover from its effects.

But the drawback to the success of those endeavours arises generally from the ignorance touching the method used to hurl the blow, that if it strikes, generally destroys. It is looked and watched for, and guarded against in every way but the right one. Still, one can but try.

"It was the heat, dear, I think. I am better now," said Madame Langen after a few minutes' silence, which Cecily had made no attempt to break; "and, besides, I never hear that man's name without feeling upset."

"Which man's? Mr. Mostyn's?"

"No, no," replied the Countess, a shiver passing through her that she could not overcome, as she answered, "Not his—Mr. Marsden's."

"I can't think why you have such a horror of the poor man. What is the reason, Maria? do tell me."

"A very simple one; he dislikes me."

"How do you know he does?"

"How do I know? Do you think the woman breathes that cannot tell in ten minutes whether a man likes her or not? Why, Cecily, how can you ask so foolish a question?"

“Because altogether it seems so strange; there appears no reason why you should so hate each other. I can understand as well as any one disliking people, and especially women; but I don’t understand your feeling towards Henry Marsden. It is not worth while, either, to hate a man that is dying.”

“He is not near death yet; people who are always dying, live longer than healthy people very often. But never mind; don’t let us talk of him. See, there are others coming here like ourselves, though they will not gain much fresh air; let us go back into the room. I daresay our respective husbands are looking for us.”

“I hope James is not looking for me, for I do so hate his doing it; besides, I told him where to wait for me.”

“Then, Cis, don’t fear; Mr. Moncrieffe is such an obedient husband, that there is no chance of his going counter to your orders,” replied the Countess, smiling; and trying, as she met the gaze of many eyes, to shake off all visible signs of the excitement caused by the shock she had received.

A shock it was—a fearful shock! Who but those who have suffered years of intense dread of being found out as guilty—of no matter what—and through circumstances at last think their secret about to lie buried in the silent grave, and so permit themselves to indulge in dreams of happiness, and then suddenly find the bright hopes of the future rudely dashed away, can understand what Maria Langen suffered that night amidst the brilliant and seemingly thoughtless crowd doing homage to a happy queen.

A right sorrow—a permitted sorrow—meets ever with ready and universal sympathy; a sinful sorrow never but from the very purest. It is only the good that dare grieve for and with the impure; those that are tainted themselves must appear scandalised at a fallen sister's downward steps. Thus Maria Langen knew full well, if her time was near, if the abyss she instinctively felt was yawning to receive her were to swallow her up, she had nothing to hope for.

“George, is it too late to change our plans and accept the post at New York? After all, I think I should prefer going to America.”

The Countess Langen spoke these words within two minutes of her being seated beside her husband in the carriage on their way home.

“Too late to change our plans? Why, of course it is, Maria. What a strange being you are! I should have thought the ball to-night would have rather confirmed you in your choice of remaining in England. Were you not made enough of? It seemed to me as if you had had admiration enough to-night to satisfy even you. But don't think it vexes me, dear child; I am never happier than when I see you so; and I know if you have a failing, it takes the shape of wishing to be appreciated. But what in the world has suddenly made New York seem attractive to you?”

“I don't know; a whim perhaps. Yes, I was happy to-night, but somehow I feel as if—well, never mind. And is it really too late? Are you quite sure, George, you could not take some means of anticipating your refusal by an acceptance? Could you not telegraph, for instance?”

As far as the dim and uncertain light admitted, Count Langen examined his wife's face: it looked

to him pale and haggard; how different to what it had been when they were going to the ball! He felt an indescribable tightening at his heart; a sensation often experienced by a foreshadowing of sorrow. And yet he had nothing to fear, nothing to dread, unless illness or death—two evils dreary enough, however, to make one tremble if they seem approaching near to those we love. And as George Langen loved his wife right well, he may be excused if at that moment he was softened to give in to her fancies; and taking her hand, he said as cheerily as he could,

“I will do what I can, my pet; so try and look your own bright self once more. I cannot bear to see a cloud over your face.”

“Thank you, George; you have always been kind and indulgent to me. You will telegraph to-morrow, will you?”

“Yes, dear.”

There was no time for more; the carriage stopped, and they were at home.

Count Langen slept that night little better than his wife. He did not at all like the task he had before him, though once having promised to tele-

graph a contradiction of his letter of that day, he had no thought of shirking the fulfilment of it. Still he felt as if such indecision of character as this would show, might tell somewhat against him. He never troubled his head as to why his wife should have turned so suddenly; he set it down at once to a woman's caprice. She had always had a fancy for crossing the Atlantic; and he supposed the feeling of having had the chance within her grasp, only to let it slip away, had redoubled her original desire.

All women were troublesome in that way, he thought; they never seemed sure of what they did or did not wish; and all he hoped now was, that if he succeeded in his endeavours to grant her desire, she would not regret it and wish herself back in England. To himself individually it was of little moment; if he had been left to make choice himself, the chances are he would unhesitatingly have accepted the post that gave an increase to his income. True, in England he was nearer to his own country; but once so far as that even was, it signified nothing to be further; so on that score he had no thought or care.

“Poor George!” were the first two words that passed murmuringly through Maria Langen’s lips when her maid was dismissed, and she found herself alone for the first time since Mrs. Moncrieffe had torn away the veil she herself had woven to shut out from her gaze all future trouble and anxiety. And yet the Countess was not a tender-hearted woman, though at that moment she vouchsafed some pity on her good, generous husband. In truth she was sorry for him; but it is doubtful whether by sacrificing his happiness she could have secured peace for herself—let alone any thing more desirable—she would not have done it. Self was naturally dear to her—it is to us all; but in her case it was, and ever had been, the dearest.

“If he only succeed—and why should he not?—all may yet be well. Fool that I was,” she exclaimed almost aloud, “to take that man’s fancies—fancies arising from a diseased body and nothing else—to take them for facts! I deserve this for my folly. But I must not allow myself to be overcome as I was to-night; neither must George fancy I am ill. O, I can surely brave

more than *this*! And what does it amount to, after all, but mere conjecture, and the chatterings of some old woman who employs her time in writing gossip, and therefore who cares not two straws whether she states facts or fables. Besides, I doubt the possibility of his throwing up his appointment altogether; he could not do it, I am certain. What would he live on? he has not so much of his own; and then as to living with his mother, it's all nonsense!"

Maria Langen went on arguing with herself till she came to the conclusion she had worried herself for next to nothing; but at the same time she thought she had done wisely in securing her husband's promise to use his best endeavours for their speedy removal. Yet, for all that, sleep did not befriend her; the gray dawn of day cast its dull light around her pillow before she could gain the temporary forgetfulness she at one moment, a few hours back, thought would be welcome if it would come in another form and be for ever.

CHAPTER VI.

SANCHO'S FEELINGS ARE HURT.

DUNKERQUE luxuriated in as great an amount of scandal as ever. It certainly can hold its own on that score as well as any provincial town can possibly do in this country. In short, it has little else to do, so it can scarcely help itself.

Chattering Chorley was still the queen of gossip, and the Consul still the principal victim, though utterly ignorant of it. Mrs. Ewart, in an evil moment for herself, had decided on writing to some one in Dunkerque when she found out the state of affairs between her niece and those arch-fiends, as she termed the Roman Catholic priests *en masse*, and endeavour to glean some little word touching Hugh Mostyn that she might afterwards trade on, and perhaps work a change with in Dacia's distorted mind. It must be borne in mind that, though a white-hot Protestant at heart, she could succumb to the priestly maxim that the

end justifies the means. After due deliberation she fixed on Miss Chorley, much to Chorley's delight, as the fountain-head of all gossip, true or false; and it looked as if she did wisely, as her only object was to hear something, no matter what; and with her so far, at any rate, she was sure to succeed.

To kind-hearted grinning little Chorley Mrs. Ewart's first letter was a fund of pleasure. She crowed over every other breathing woman she came in contact with; she made such an ocean of gossip out of it, was so mysterious at times, hinted such wonders, that she inoculated every one with a curiosity that, as it could only be gratified through her, rendered her an object of attraction to the whole town, even the stern sombre Consul. He seemed no more proof than the rest, in this instance, against Miss Chorley's powers of fascination. She had taken good care, with him at any rate, to act warily. She had no notion, as she would with any *on dit* of the town, to blurt out her news then and there; but she threw out hints, and let stray words drop, that nearly drove Hugh Mostyn out of his senses.

How he hated the little woman, and yet how civil he was to her! He could have strangled her, if he thought that operation would have forced out the information he was hungering to hear. The good soul had never been so sought after since a certain time long, long years back,—so long, it seemed almost a dream now,—when she had kindled a true love in an honest man's heart, which now lay cold and silent beneath the hot sandy plains of Egypt; but which, till fever struck down, had ever beat loyally for the poor thing, who from that time on was left alone in the world.

Did she think of that, I wonder, when she heard that unmistakable footfall gaining on her own little trotting step? did she for one wild moment think that tall, dark, stern-faced man followed her about with any feelings akin to those she had once given birth to in another? I believe not; I believe she was a fool, but not such an utter fool as that. Yet women are strange beings; and the older they get, the more incomprehensible do they seem, and the more liable to be guilty of crazy actions and wonderful fancies. But Chorley

was only flattered ; a little innocent uncontrollable vanity made her heart thump just the least in the world when she fancied the Consul had made his way right across the Grand Place on purpose to meet her. It is very pleasant to be sought after and be made much of, even if for the sake of others and not for one's own ; it is better than not being cared for at all.

For days had Hugh Mostyn endeavoured to overcome his pride, and condescend to ask Miss Chorley if Mrs. Singleton and her daughter were still in London ; and now he had brought himself into a sufficiently meek frame of mind to break through his cold and haughty reserve to make this simple inquiry. The fact was, his nature lacked every description of curiosity, and he hated it in others ; and of late years his increased tendency to suspicion had always made him think if any questions, however ordinary, were asked of him concerning himself, whether as in connection with the past, present, or future, there was some hidden motive for it.

But every-day curiosity would never have prompted him to seek Miss Chorley, and she knew

that right well. Her woman's instinct made her see tolerably distinctly the truth; besides, Miss Singleton's sudden departure from Dunkerque, the Consul's subsequent doubly disagreeable manner,—almost surly,—Mrs. Ewart's too simple (and therefore unsatisfactory) explanations as to the cause of her niece's leaving, and Mrs. Singleton's sighs and complaints redoubling at her daughter's selfishness,—all helped to let the little woman have a very good insight into the matter; and she was right sorry for them. In her heart she rather liked Hugh Mostyn; but she wondered how a young girl could. Youth seems more generally attracted by joyousness than gloominess; and then he was so proud, and kept people at such a distance, and seemed so utterly indifferent to every one and every thing concerning them, that she was not surprised at his being no favourite.

The truth is, Miss Chorley would gladly have told him every word she knew—and how little that was she only knew—but he never gave her a chance. A haughty “Indeed!” or “O, really!” completely closed up all possibility of communicating to him her meagre news. Her amaze-

ment, and pleasure too, may therefore be imagined when she found that not alone did the Consul join her in her walk, followed by Sancho, looking as stately and unapproachable as his master, for that he had done half a dozen times, but that he came out point-blank with a question which enabled her to dole out with a liberal tongue her stock of news.

“Miss Chorley, can you tell me if Mrs. Singleton is still in London? or—”

“O, dear, yes, Mr. Mostyn; she and Miss Singleton are both there; and Mrs. Singleton much better, though, of course, not strong: that, you know, she never can be; but Miss Singleton is very poorly—very poorly indeed; and Mrs. Ewart says she should be very glad if they were to leave town, for she does not think it agrees with Miss Dacia; and she asks after you, Mr. Mostyn, and begs to be kindly remembered to all here; so that, of course, includes you —”

“Who does?”

“Why, Mrs. Ewart, to be sure! It is her letter I am talking to you about. She says nothing more about any one, but I have her letter in my pocket: would you like to see it?”

“No, thank you,” replied Hugh with a smile; but, for a wonder, he accepted the offer in the spirit it was meant. “When you write to Mrs. Ewart, pray present my compliments.” He had bowed his adieu, when he turned back, and said somewhat suddenly, “By the way, Miss Chorley, I have a friend coming to see me; I know you like to have news when it is fresh; his name is Henry Marsden.” And after saying that he walked away.

He considered now he had quite discharged his debt, and paid Miss Chorley in the coin she loved best. So he had; she took no umbrage at his words: on the contrary, she duly appreciated his kindness, and dispensed out her information judiciously and well, as she generally did all she received.

Dacia ill! That was all Hugh Mostyn remembered of Miss Chorley’s information; and it certainly was the pith of it; but it was quite sufficient, quite enough for him to ponder over. For days and days did he think of nothing else. Reader, did you ever have any one very dear to you at a distance, taken ill; and were you ever so placed

that it was utterly impossible for you to be with them? Though the post brought you daily accounts of their state, did you not get racked with anxiety as the hour approached that generally brought you tidings of them? Then what, think you, is felt by those who can hear nothing, can learn nothing, and yet love as dearly as man is capable of? No words can express the constant wearing forebodings—all springing from the restless, uneasy mind—that for ever haunt one. Such suffering did Hugh Mostyn undergo, till one morning the post brought him a letter from Mrs. Ewart. He was sitting before an untouched breakfast, when his servant came in with it, and two others as well.

Sancho had been waiting with most exemplary patience for his usual bone; and when he saw the letters brought in, he did as he had felt himself compelled to do once or twice lately, remind his master he was there, his appetite not having failed him; for he knew right well, if reading was commenced, the chance of his being attended to was worth nothing. So he raised his great paw and laid it slowly and heavily on Hugh's arm, looking up into his face at the same time with a comically

pitiful countenance. Not to notice the dog was impossible, but the idea of waiting to cut off a chicken bone for him equally so: therefore, to make all right, he took the dish containing half a broiled chicken and placed it down on the floor by Sancho's side. Sancho looked at the dish and then at his master, and walked away to the spot farthest off in the room he could find. He felt injured, and he showed it.

When Hugh found time to notice Sancho, he saw him sitting bolt upright, watching him, but there were two big tears the poor fellow had shed, and that still remained half way down his nose. Mostyn never hurt Sancho's feelings in the same way again: there is no doubt the dog thought he was being made a fool of, or else that his master was slighting him, by not carving properly for him.

As Hugh opened Mrs. Ewart's letter, his own to Dacia fell on the table; in a moment he saw it had been opened, and therefore he felt she had either not given it to Dacia, or Dacia had refused to accede to his proposition. Either way, disappointment must be the result; and yet he asked

himself how he could for a moment have imagined it to be otherwise. Mrs. Ewart's letter did not tend to remove his anxiety as to Dacia's health, or in any way create hope. After a few lines of no importance, she went on to explain why he had not sooner heard from her. "Unforeseen and painful circumstances," she wrote "at last induced me to determine on giving your letter to Miss Singleton; that is, if on perusing it—which option, you recollect, I reserved to myself before undertaking to have any thing to do with it—I saw no obvious objection. With any other than Dacia I should have refrained from giving it; but I felt very sure she would view the matter in the same light as I myself did, and therefore I ran no risk in leaving it to herself to judge and decide; though her decision arose from far different motives from those I should have imagined they would. All I have to say to you on her part is, that she feels on the subject as you say you have hitherto done, and that you must never meet again; but that she will pray for you. I have little to add on my own behalf. I can only say, may God be with you! but recollect He never blesses an unrighteous cause."

This letter appeared to Hugh like a closing up of all communication, a shutting the door between all future intercourse; and at the same time leaving him with a wretched conviction that something was wrong with Dacia. How long he puzzled his brains over what the "unforeseen and painful circumstances" could be which had after many weeks induced Mrs. Ewart to show his letter to her niece, none but Sancho could avow; but certainly longer than was reasonable, especially as he made no one step in advance towards the solution of them.

At any other moment the two other letters received that morning would have been read with eagerness and pleasure; but now neither his love for his mother nor his affection for his friend could give rise to a feeling of anxiety or barely a desire to learn what they had to say. However, he took up the one from his mother at last; it was like her usual letters, full of deep love and anxiety for her only child, her earthly idol. She had heard from Williams, who was converted into a species of spy by her, that her darling was more sad, more sombre than ever; that he went out less,

and rarely had any company at home; and that altogether things did not seem in a very satisfactory state. Mrs. Mostyn urged her son's obtaining a few weeks' leave of absence and going over to see her. Hugh shook his head as he read this. "It would hardly cheer me, I think," he muttered, "though it might comfort my poor mother."

He laid this letter aside and took up the other, which told him of Henry Marsden's speedy arrival; he hoped in a couple of days, he said, to reach Paris, and to be with Hugh by the end of the week.

This was pleasant news at any rate; for he half expected to find, after his intimation that Miss Singleton was no longer there, Henry might not care to retard his journey to England for the sole purpose of seeing him. But Hugh Mostyn hardly did his friend justice; he judged him, as we are all apt to do others, by himself; and he knew full well that were he Henry Marsden, a free man, four-and-twenty hours should not elapse before he found himself within reach of Dacia Singleton.

O, how he rebelled against his fate! Bound

hand and foot, and to what? He ground his teeth and clinched his hands, as if to hold them fast from doing some rash deed, as he thought of her who had been the curse of his life. At moments like this he meditated doing what at any other his sense of right withheld him from. He thought, why not free himself, why remain chained like a slave to one who was naught but a dark, black shadow? and though Dacia now might say she thought as he did, might she not change her mind when she knew him to be free? might she not merely have sent him that message on account of the way he had worded his letter? Had he not worded it injudiciously? He read it over, and he came to the conclusion that no woman—much less one of Dacia's disposition, whose pride was as great as his own—could have made any other reply than she did. He had distinctly stated his views in regard to the proposition he had made and offered to carry out; he clearly showed that he considered man could not undo what God had done; and yet upon all that he said he would take that step, to make her his wife. To any one it would appear as if the letter had

been written in a spirit of pity for her ; that on account of her love for him, he was ready to do what he considered wrong, and not through the influence of his own love for her.

“ All I do seems to be ill-judged, and work differently from what I desire. When will my evil genius cease to guide me, and my good angel take its place ? Never, I suppose, till I cease to care what happens.”

And yet, like most people, Hugh Mostyn had himself to thank for his present misery. It is rarely we have not ourselves to blame for our troubles. True, it makes them none the lighter—perhaps the reverse ; it might be better if we could turn round and abuse our neighbour, and put on him the weight which bears us down so pitilessly when it lies on our own shoulders. With Hugh Mostyn’s peculiar views—peculiar according to the present state of people’s ideas on the subject—he had no earthly excuse for placing himself in the direct road to danger. He might just as well have stood in front of the cannon’s mouth that he knew in a few seconds must be fired, and not expect to be killed, as have allowed himself freely to

enjoy Dacia Singleton's society and not expect to become attached to her.

His opinion of her—formed almost immediately on seeing her—ought to have warned him. But a big board put up with DANGEROUS on it in huge capitals does not save people from going through the ice and being drowned; so, after all, how can one expect conscience whispering the word very mildly will save a man's heart from being lost?

Henry Marsden's advent in Dunkerque caused a far greater stir in the town than it did in Mostyn's small household. It was no sooner known that he had actually arrived than cards came thick and fast, followed up by invitations, one or two to dinner, and others to *soirées*. Even Mrs. Thomas thought she might show some slight attention to a man who would be no doubt an eligible son-in-law, without any great want of respect to her husband's memory.

"What in the world am I to do, Hugh? I never could go to all these places. You don't think yourself bound to accept them, do you?"

"Accept them!—no. And I would not inflict

such an amount of annoyance on you for the world. We will refuse every one of them. I can say you are not strong enough to go out in the night air; for once your not being well will stand you in good stead. The people are perfectly mad here for any thing in the shape of a new man."

"Why, is there a scarcity of husbands?"

"I don't know; but there's an awful scarcity of common sense. Why, Harry, when I first came here, I went nearly out of my mind. Men, women, and children came down upon me like rain in a heavy shower; and one—I never knew such a woman in my life! She drinks, or is mad. At any rate she cannot put two words together rightly. Her husband died a short time since. Poor Thomas! I am not surprised. The only wonder is he lived so long. She would kill any ordinary man in a couple of weeks."

"There's an invitation amongst these from some one of the name of Thomas."

"O, that's the woman! There is but one family in the town of the name. If you went there to-night, she would probably ask you your

intentions towards her dictionary daughter to-morrow."

"Her what?"

"It is a name they give Miss Thomas, for she follows her mother about to interpret what she says; and a very necessary person I assure you she proves to be, if Mrs. Thomas begins to talk."

"You must have missed the Singletons, I should think, terribly," said Marsden, after a moment's pause.

"Yes," replied Hugh, in a tone he endeavoured to make natural and indifferent.

Presently he tried to say something more about them; but he could think of nothing; he could neither speak nor look, without a certain restraint being visible, when on the subject of the Singletons; and yet he was prepared to talk about them. He knew Henry Marsden would wish to discuss them, and all connected with them; still he had to wait for it all to emanate in the form of questions from him before he could get beyond the simple "Yes."

But fate, in the form of Mr. Butler, saved

him from the discussion on this occasion ; and, though it only delayed it, still he felt the temporary reprieve and relief. What he would wish to have done would have been to have opened his heart to Marsden fully and freely. But how could he crush out all hope in his friend, or how could he betray Dacia's love for himself ! It was impossible ; he would let events take their course, and allow circumstances, or Dacia herself, to open Harry Marsden's eyes to the hopelessness of his love.

So it was that Marsden's first visit to Dunkerque resulted in nothing to the one or the other, as far as Dacia Singleton was connected with their fate, and he left in total ignorance of the state of Hugh's feelings regarding her.

CHAPTER VII.

A VISION AT THE ALTAR.

THE day was very hot—it was the middle of July—and Mrs. Singleton, who was still in London, was sitting with her bonnet on, ready to go out. She was leaning back on the sofa, her eyes closed, and fanning herself with a slow and measured movement. She was looking somewhat pale and thin, yet no one would have remarked on her as being ill. Dacia was busy with a very fine piece of embroidery, and sitting close to the window to benefit by the little breeze there was.

“Dacia, give me my smelling-bottle.”

Dacia rose, and was going out of the room to fetch it, thinking her mother had left it in her bedroom.

“Don’t you see it’s on the table? Really, Dacia, you get more tiresome and worrying every

day. You take no trouble about any thing. Your thoughts are every where but where you are yourself; and you do nothing but what pleases you, totally regardless of other people's likings."

"I did not see it was on the table, mamma," replied her daughter, a slight colour rising to her pale face. She looked worried enough herself, if one might judge by the sorrow-stricken, care-worn face, so different to the bright healthful being she was a short year ago.

"How late Cecily is!" said Mrs. Singleton.

"It is not three yet, mamma."

"I am wrong, of course," exclaimed Mrs. Singleton, inhaling her salts; "and you are right, and your sister is punctual."

Dacia made no reply. Mrs. Singleton then continued:

"You are very disrespectful, Dacia; you treat me as no child ever yet treated a mother. I hope the day may not come when you will repent of your conduct. I hope you may never know the sorrow of having an undutiful child."

Mrs. Singleton whined out rather than spoke this; and with little pauses between every few

words, as if endeavouring to overcome her feelings and steady her voice.

“Indeed, mamma, you are wrong; I do not treat you disrespectfully; and what have I ever done that is undutiful?”

Dacia went near to her mother, and kneeling down by her side, took her hand and said :

“If you would but seem to love me a little, mamma, and be kind to me, you do not know how I could love you; and I should never desire any thing beyond being with you; but you are always finding fault with me, and complaining without cause of my manner.”

“There—get up, Dacia; I hate theatrical ways; there is no need to go down on your knees. The fact is, I have been too kind and indulgent, and devoted myself too much to you, and the consequence is I meet with ingratitude only in return. If I had not always gratified every wish you ever expressed, you would not be what you are now.”

Dacia rose, as she was bid, and with a sigh gave up the battle. There was no use in trying to change her mother; each time she tried to make a step towards a happier state of affairs, she met

with the same rebuff. So she returned to her seat, and took up her work again. The bitter seed her mother was planting within her was likely to bear bitter fruit, if some strong loving hand was not stretched forth in time to tear it up by the roots.

Presently Mrs. Ewart was announced.

"You always come, Ursula, when one is going out. I am expecting Cecily to call for me every minute," said Mrs. Singleton to her sister-in-law in a snappish tone.

"Never mind; I won't keep you; indeed, I did not come in to stay. I can sit and chat with Dacia for half an hour, and then I must go, for I have an appointment."

Dacia glanced up anxiously and rapidly at the clock over the chimney-piece. The look did not escape Mrs. Ewart—few things did. Half an hour—Dacia too had an appointment, but that time she could spare; her aunt's visit therefore would not interfere with it.

Very soon Mrs. Moncrieffe came for her mother. She did not come up; she merely sent word to say she was there; and Mrs. Singleton,

after wishing Mrs. Ewart good-bye, and begging Dacia to endeavour and spend her afternoon more profitably than she could possibly do if she passed it in straining her eyes over that horrid work, swept out of the room, somewhat in the fashion she was given to do in days of yore at Christchurch when sufficiently pleased at something to forget she was an invalid; but she was graceful in all her movements—notwithstanding her unhappy temper—whether as the mistress of Christchurch, or a widow with a limited income. So aunt and niece were left alone.

“You must have found it very warm walking, Mum.”

“I did. So much so, that I am very glad to find you are staying at home this afternoon; but why did you not drive with your mother and sister?”

“O, you know the old saying, that two are company, but three are none. Besides, mamma can’t be with me without finding fault. I should be too quiet, or else talk too much; and then I know Cis thinks three ladies in her open carriage destroys the perfection of its outline.”

“And, in short, all things considered, you have come to the conclusion you are best at home. I will take off my bonnet for a little,” continued Mrs. Ewart after a pause; “this room is very hot.”

“Do,” said Dacia; but said in such a tone that “don’t” would have sounded much more what she wished.

She glanced again at the clock; fifteen minutes had already elapsed; she felt certain fifteen more would not bring her aunt’s visit to a conclusion; and she began to wonder what she should do in order to be punctual to her engagement.

Have you never felt as Dacia Singleton did? That something very urgent, very pressing, required your presence elsewhere, whilst on the other hand you are detained by those who, having nothing else to do, think they are committing no wrong in preventing you doing something more profitable than gossiping with them. It is not considered polite to tell people to go; but it is often very hard upon one that, for the sake of rules laid down by society, one is frequently driven to break one’s word, or else appear

what is looked on as far more criminal—ill-bred. Some people, when they know they are about to undergo the infliction of a visit from a bore, and that there is no possibility of denying themselves, give well-defined directions to their servants, that, after a given time, they are to appear and state some imaginary person requests to see them as soon as convenient; and so, by cheating the obnoxious visitors in a civil way, you get rid of them.

But Dacia could neither have recourse to that nor any other plan to induce Mrs. Ewart to curtail her visit. In the first place, though now she never sought her—as self-denial was to be practised in all things—she never felt so peacefully contented as when her aunt was with her; and in the next, the thought of driving her away never crossed her mind; besides, she was not a person easily deceived.

“Do you know if Mr. Marsden has returned to town?” asked Mrs. Ewart.

“No, Mum; I have heard nothing of him since you told me of his going over to Dunkerque.”

“ I told you, child ! I never told you.”

“ No, it was Cis, I think ; but you told me the cause that took him there,” said Dacia in a confused sort of way.

“ Only what that Chattering Chorley said ; and I have my doubts as to the truth of her statement ; not, poor soul, that she intentionally would tell a falsehood ; but simply that, having no knowledge of the real state of affairs, she would not see any harm in adding her private surmises to mere rumour, and thus finish by concocting a very improbable story.”

Now Dacia immediately came to the conclusion, from her aunt's speech, that she had heard again from Dunkerque, but she did not ask. In the first place, she thought any question she put would prolong the visit, and in the next she knew full well the penalty she would have to pay for the gratification of any erring curiosity.

Poor Dacia ! she was fearfully entangled in the net that had been steadily woven around her. There seemed no more chance of her escape from its toils than there is for the ship when once within the fatal power of the quicksands.

Mrs. Ewart did her best to keep up the conversation ; at last she began to lose patience.

“ Dacia, I wish you would tell me if I am in your way ; because, if you are expecting any one, and wish to be alone, I will go at once.”

“ No, indeed, Mum, I am not expecting any one. How could I have any one coming to see me that I should not wish you to see ?”

“ I don’t know, my dear ; but—well, I won’t touch on that subject. Will you come out with me ?”

“ I can’t, Mum, thank you ; I—”

“ You need not tell me, Dacia. God help you, child ! for you will not let any other do it. There ; I won’t stay any longer. With all my deep-rooted aversion to such a marriage as yours would have to be, if you became Hugh Mostyn’s wife, I would yet rather see you that a million times over than what you are.”

“ Mum, you said you would not speak on that subject any more.”

“ I did, Dacia ; but when I look at you, and think what that fearful idolatrous belief is bringing you to, is it to be wondered that I cannot help

sometimes breaking out? Look at yourself now, and think what you were six months ago, or even less. Your health cannot stand it; neither mind nor body is equal to withstand the terrible methods they employ for moulding you to their purposes. My God! how can any one be so blind? There, Dacia, I will go. I do no good; I feel as if my words would not even make the impression that in time is effected by drops of water on stone, and I weary out myself as well. God bless you, dear child!" And Mrs. Ewart kissed her niece and left.

In truth, Dacia was changed—changed in all things but one, and that one she strove day and night to conquer; but it was too stubborn for her as yet; it was *feeling* she could not master. She could control her words and deeds, and very nearly her thoughts; but her heart would still rebel; it still asserted its strength against her will; and it was, up till now, the stronger of the two. It would yet beat with earthly affections; it would make itself heard at moments when the lips were breathing forth earnest and deep prayers that it might be stilled, that all earthly love might

be crushed from out it, and naught left that could take away her thoughts or wishes from her God.

Dacia Singleton fought and struggled against nature, and yet unavailingly, to the very end. She never attempted to reason with herself that God's most perfect gift to man could not be altogether evil; that love was not put into our hearts for the mere sake of teaching us how to crush it out; that if we did not love our earthly brother, we were ill calculated to love our Creator. But she was not allowed to discuss the subject with others, or to argue it with herself: she was to accept all she was told, without daring to question a word—and she did so.

Her small delicate hands were clasped tightly together, and the large hot tears fell slowly down her pale cheeks; her beautiful blue eyes looking so full and deep, but so unutterably sad. She sat on for about five minutes after her aunt left her; she did not dare indulge longer. She had to be at St. Wilfred's by four o'clock; it was the hour for Benediction, and she had been desired not to miss it; besides, she had to see Father Leigh afterwards.

It was always with a feeling of peace and resignation Dacia rose from her knees after the ceremony of Benediction. It is one of the many forms of worship in the Church of Rome calculated to comfort and soothe, independently of the effect produced by the exquisite music which generally accompanies it in most churches, but which at St. Wilfred's was of wide renown for its beauty. It always brought back to Dacia's recollection the first time she ever was present at it; and try as she would, and pray as she did unceasingly and fervently, to blot out the remembrance of that morning from her heart, she yet recollected with a thrill of joy she never learnt to repress the words of wild passionate love Hugh Mostyn breathed in her ear.

Father Leigh had discovered that he had more influence over Miss Singleton, and that his wily subtle words were listened to with greater submission, when she came forth from Benediction than at any other period; he therefore, with a cunning and craft not unworthy of a St.-Wilfredian Father, reserved all matters of import for such moments.

At times, when Dacia was pressed hard, she

still showed a rebellious spirit. There were certain points—such as those affecting her relations with her mother, sister, and aunt—that she did not yet see through the priestly eyes of Father Leigh. She could not bring herself, even with his teaching, to think that a child need have no concern for a parent's feelings; but Dacia was not aware of how, little by little, her spiritual father was gaining ground—how by slow degrees he was working out, surely and unerringly, his own ends.

After service was over, and Dacia was making her way through the crowd towards Father Leigh's confessional, her conscience not over-burdened with sins, she raised her eyes for a moment to the high altar as she knelt reverently down before it, in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament enshrined at the back of a curtain of gold tissuc. As she did so, she saw the figure of a man—which figure could not possibly possess its double in the world—kneeling on the altar-steps, apparently in earnest prayer.

She started up somewhat hastily, and her thoughts were brought earthwards as if by magic.

In a moment she had the whole occurrences of the night she wandered over the Dunes at Dunkerque brought before her: the man there kneeling, though she could not see his face, she felt sure could be no other than the Rev. John Way, and yet he had on the habit worn by the Fathers of St. Wilfred!

In a dreamy state she moved on; her eyes must have deceived her. She thought at first of asking Father Leigh; but she hesitated about it, she so dreaded going back to that portion of her life that could in any way drag Hugh Mostyn's name to the surface; and so the whole matter for the time being was driven out of her head by the all-important discussion that ensued on the merits of a convent life.

Father Leigh, that afternoon, told Miss Singleton he had had a vision, in which he saw the Blessed Virgin point her—Miss Singleton—out as an instrument chosen especially to do God's work on earth, and which could not be performed unless father and mother were given up, and all earthly ties were dissolved.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALL MRS. WHITEMAN'S FAULT.

"THANK God you are well, Hugh!" exclaimed Henry Marsden, as he grasped his friend's hand at the station, on his arrival at Dunkerque.

"Well, Harry, what should make you fancy I was the reverse?"

"Why, your sending for me, to be sure. What is it, though, Hugh? Remember I am an anxious fellow where those I care for are concerned; and ever since I received your telegram I have been racking my brain as to what sort of state I should find you in. I expected to see you in your bed at the very least, and perhaps delirious."

"In body I am well enough, so don't trouble on that score; but let us get out of this noise and bustle. Here; give your luggage-ticket to Hervey, and he will see to it all. We will go home."

"Where is Sancho?"

“Outside ; not very far, you may be sure.”

There he was, sitting, like a gentleman, away from the common herd, but keeping the door his master passed through well in sight. He disliked being rubbed against by the blouse community ; and though he permitted any one to pat him, he resented any thing approaching to familiarity. He was thoroughbred in all his notions, and he expected due regard to be paid to his tastes.

That evening, after dinner, Mostyn proposed, if Henry felt equal to it, that they should take a stroll down to the pier.

“I can talk better in the open air, Harry.”

It was a sultry night ; not a breath of wind was stirring in the town, and hardly any by the sea. The water was calm and smooth, and nothing was heard but the gentle rippling of the tiny waves as they played along the sand. It was not a night that could have done harm to one in a worse state than Henry Marsden. Sancho never ceased panting, till sleep overtook him whilst his master was talking.

They sat at the pier-head. Henry Marsden noticed a hard defiant expression come over Hugh's

generally impassive face. He felt instantly what the subject was he was going to broach; he knew there was but that one that could call forth that look. But Mostyn, without uttering a word, drew a letter from his breast-pocket and put it in his companion's hand, whilst the other read it by the aid of the brilliant light thrown upon them by the Seaman's Guide. He himself sat with his arms folded, his well-shaped lips ominously pressed together, and his full deep eyes watching intently every change that passed over Marsden's face.

"The whole written there is perfectly true," said Henry, folding the letter up and returning it to Hugh. He spoke very calmly.

"True, Harry! In God's name, how do you know?"

"I saw her myself."

"Where?"

"At more places than one; but amongst them, at Mrs. Moncrieffe's."

"Mrs. Moncrieffe's! Mrs. Singleton's married daughter?"

"The same."

"And you never told me?"

“How could I? Did you not make me give you a solemn promise never to utter her name before you—never to allude to her in the most distant manner, unless you yourself spoke first. I kept my word, as you would have done. I expected something of this sort to come to your ears sooner or later.”

There was a pause—rather a long one; for Mostyn was passing in review his gone-by life, as in connection with the one concerning whom he had called Henry Marsden to his side to help him in clearing up what he had imagined a deep mystery. When he thought over the very short span of happiness she had granted him, and the long days of bitter misery she had bequeathed him, together with the last final blow that, through her instrumentality, he had been forced to inflict on another, as well as bear heavily himself, it is not to be wondered at if his heart hardened, and that he resolved to wash out the stain he found now sullied his honour, even at the cost of destroying her. What right had she to look for mercy at his hands? Had she shown him any?

The letter that had called forth such dark and

sad reminiscences, and gave rise to Marsden's sudden journey, was from Hugh's mother, Mrs. Mostyn. It ran thus :

“MY DEAR BOY,—I have just heard from good old Mr. Fraser that she (Maria) is living in London, and received every where as Countess Langen, her reputed husband being a Norwegian, and secretary to the S—— Legation. How can you hold any longer to your strange views? Come over, and go back free and unfettered. In any case, you are called on to do something. God bless you and direct you, my dearest child !

“Your devoted mother,

“M. MOSTYN.”

“Who is this man named Langen ?”

“Your mother tells you. I know no more but that he seems an honest upright man, too good to be cheated as he is.”

“Then where—where is the other ?”

“God knows. Sent adrift, perhaps. He was poor ; and she was not fond of poverty, you know. Langen is a wealthy man, I believe.”

"When did you see her last?"

"A day or two since."

"Now, Harry, begin from the beginning, and tell me all you know about her. I will listen calmly, and will not interrupt you. Only tell me every thing."

Quickly did Marsden sketch an account of his various meetings with Maria Langen; and it was only when he had to touch on points where Dacia Singleton's name was introduced that he lingered awhile. That last time he saw her—when he was walking with Dacia by his side—seemed too pleasant a reminiscence for him to pass over hastily. An impatient gesture, which did not escape him, from Hugh Mostyn recalled him, however, to the true point he had been asked to detail, and prevented any more unnecessary digressions.

"Does Miss Singleton seem to share her sister's infatuation for her?" asked Hugh, after listening with nervous attention to all that was said.

"No; so far from it, she seems to have a strange antipathy to her, and yet is at times fascinated by her. She told me the other day she never saw her without a shrinking feeling, and

still she could not resist being attracted by her when in her society."

Mostyn shuddered. If Dacia but knew all! An intense desire to put a stop to their meeting again took possession of him; but it would be a matter difficult to carry out, till he could do it through himself personally.

"Harry, tell me—what would you have me do? Mind, I don't tell you I will follow your advice; but I should like to hear what it would be."

"Shake off the incubus you have borne so long and so bravely, and enjoy once more freedom in thought and feeling. You would be another man in six months."

"Not if you knew all," thought Hugh; but he said nothing, nor did they again touch on the subject till the following morning; then it was Marsden spoke.

"What can I do for you? How can I help you?"

Hugh Mostyn looked at him; a smile of affection lighting up his face for a moment.

"I have never thanked you, Harry, for coming; but you don't want words, I know.

Still, I owe you a debt for this. I could not *send* you that letter, and I could not possibly take it to you."

"Don't make excuses, Hugh; coming did not put me out in the least; only the feeling of anxiety as to the cause of your hasty summons."

"I ought to have written; but I could not have waited quietly for the post to reach you. You ask me what you can do for me. I will tell you. Stay with me till to-morrow; then go back; go down and see my mother; see Mr. Fraser; ascertain how he found out what she wrote to me; then write to me, telling me all the facts as you learn them. I wish I knew in what way to put a stop to—to her visiting the Singletons. I would write to Mrs. Ewart; but I hardly see, unless she admitted knowing who she was, how she could prevent it."

"She couldn't; and Mrs. Moncrieffe would only hold on by her the tighter. Leave it till you resolve what steps to take; and do, Hugh, act like a reasonable man. Look at the life you are now leading, and look at the life you might lead if you choose."

Mostyn made no reply, and Henry Marsden saw there was no use in attempting to argue the point at that moment. There was a determined obstinate look in Hugh's countenance then that showed he was not likely to be persuaded by any thing that might be urged on him. Henry merely promised to comply with his request, and the subject was let drop.

After Henry Marsden left Dunkerque, Hugh found his existence intolerable. An incessant longing for activity, a rebelling against his monotonous life, a hatred to all he came in contact with,—except perhaps Chattering Chorley, for which same feeling in her favour he felt somewhat disgusted with himself,—rendered his life well-nigh a burden to him. He made all sorts of resolves; he planned no end of ways for turning the current of his life-stream; but they were nothing but so many impulses that, on calmer reflection, he cast from him as unworthy and contemptible of his truer self.

He shunned the Dunkerque society more than ever. He was never known to ask any but strangers travelling through to enter his house. He

rarely acknowledged any of the residents, if he met them, but by a formal distant bow; and, in short, he and Sancho might have been in England for any profit the Dunkerquoises received from man or beast.

Chattering Chorley, however, had a charm for him that none other in the place had; and the Consul decidedly had succeeded, with all his gloominess, to fascinate the little woman in a manner that rendered her a staunch supporter and an outspoken friend. She never permitted a word to be uttered against him in her hearing without energetically and smilingly protesting in favour of his virtues and good qualities; and generally the last shot she fired in his defence was declaring him to be too good for the place, and therefore he was not of course appreciated.

Henry Marsden had left nearly a week back, when one morning the Consul met Miss Chorley within a few doors of his own house. She was walking with her usual short quick little steps, and brightened up with a fussy look (as she invariably did when pleased), when she saw Hugh Mostyn coming towards her. The expression his

foes called sulky and his friends sad was certainly fully developed on his countenance this morning. He had just heard from Henry Marsden. The letter was unsatisfactory, and told nothing; only spoke of what he was going to do. Altogether Hugh felt disappointed; though what further he could learn than he already knew, beyond some minor facts, it was difficult to say. A postscript stated that Mrs. Ewart had heard he was leaving Dunkerque for good. She did not tell him where she obtained the information; nor did he ask her; but he said he had contradicted it.

But Mostyn knew perfectly well where she got the information. He saw the informer approaching. Why or wherefore she had started such a piece of gossip, he could not understand, nor what could have first originated it; for however Miss Chorley was able to enlarge on facts, she generally wanted the foundation laid for her. She never really fabricated herself.

"Miss Chorley, did you tell Mrs. Ewart I was going to leave Dunkerque for good and all?" asked the Consul, after he had greeted her in a very formal manner.

“To be sure I did. Isn’t it true?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

“O, I am so glad, so very glad, Mr. Mostyn!”

And the small round eyes laughed merrily, in keeping with her ever-smiling face.

She was glad; and she was about the only one in the whole town of whom one could say the same. Each and all would joyfully have uttered the word farewell with light hearts and good wishes for a better successor. But not so with Chattering Chorley. Her kind soft nature pitied the lonely man. She knew so well what it was to be alone, to have no one being with whom she could say she was first. She thought it was only because she was a woman that she could endure it better, that she could associate with her own sex, and so cast aside utter solitude. Whereas no doubt a man could not do so; he would shrink from talking of the little follies of which her whole life was made up.

The vague rumours that soon after his arrival in the town had floated about had quietly dropped into a general understanding that he had met with a disappointment. What shape or form it had

taken, no one seemed to care. Miss Chorley in her own mind had settled he had been jilted. Very bad, she thought; but not so bad, she fancied, as if death had come and seized the one he loved away from him. To her, that was the most awful sorrow God could inflict on mortal being. We are all so apt to think our own troubles the severest to bear, that it was not to be wondered if poor Miss Chorley thought so too. But she was a brave little woman withal. She never worried others with her pitiful tale. She had a smile for every one—a smile that duty had made her assume. She thought she had no right to make people miserable by wearing a sorry face and parading her troubles, and that smile which now had become a confirmed grin none but herself knew what hard work it had been to gain.

So her sympathy for Hugh Mostyn had made her finish by really liking him; and she would rather he remained where he was,—gloomy face, stern manner, and all,—than that the most joyous, gay individual that could be found should fill his post. Dearly as she loved a bit of gaiety,—as dearly as a bit of gossip,—she would not

for that have another in the Consul's place. Yet her regard for him met with no return. He spoke to her, true, when he spoke to no one else; but it was generally when he had something to say, or something to hear; it was not for the mere sake of talking to her—she knew that right well; still her sympathy flowed just as freely, and her soft heart was not one whit hardened.

“Where did you hear the news you so readily sent off to England?”

“Mrs. Whiteman told me. She said it was all settled; and I did not like to ask you, for I know you hate questions.”

Something very near a smile for a moment crossed Mostyn's face. Mrs. Whiteman was rather a recent addition to the Dunkerque elique; she arrived soon after the Singletons had left. She had with her an old man, a General, but of a different name from her own; he rejoiced in the ancient one of Percy. Mrs. Whiteman was a widow of a certain age, large and expansive, with a mass of heavy black hair—yet her complexion was by no means dark; some thought she had not intended to wear so dense a hue, but that a little

mistake in the *pomade* she used had brought it about.

Her features, though coarse, did not render her face absolutely plain ; and being a good dresser, she was what people term a fine woman. She swept things over as she walked past them ; a sort of person that little children instinctively make way for ; there was something overpowering in her. She had a commanding air, much more so than General Percy, who in her presence instantly became the subaltern, and she the commanding officer. She was by way of taking care of the General at Dunkerque ; no one seemed quite to understand how the *ménage* was carried on, but scandal was tolerably silent. The General was so very old, and Mrs. Whiteman, who was understood to be a widow, was so very proper in her views of things, and so severe upon the most trifling slips in propriety, that I doubt much if any one would have dreamt of laying a charge of the kind at her door.

She nursed and tended the General, however, with such unflagging devotion, that surely his life was worth something to her. One peculiarity

which Chorley gained wind of, in some way through the servants, was that the General never wrote a letter or received one that Mrs. Whiteman did not see first. She, moreover, never left him an instant till he was in bed; and it also oozed out, that the old gentleman had made a will since Mrs. Whiteman had brought him to Dunkerque. Let us hope, for we have little to do with her now or hereafter, that if she gets the old man's money, she will have earned it by care and tenderness during his life.

This woman Hugh Mostyn entirely abhorred. He not only viewed her with other eyes, and less charitably, than the Dunkerque people did, but he considered her selfish, cruel, and mercenary.

"And did you hear how Mrs. Whiteman became acquainted with my plans, or rather assumed to be?"

"No; she told me, when I asked, that she never gave up names."

"Then, you tell her from me, the next time she takes the liberty of talking about what she has no concern, to try, at all events, to speak the truth."

"O, Mr. Mostyn, I couldn't tell her that!" replied Miss Chorley with a smile; "but I will tell her it is not the case, and that you are not going to leave us; and, of course, I will write to Mrs. Ewart."

"Marsden has told her already."

"O, that reminds me, Mr. Mostyn, I so wanted to tell you how disgusted and angry Mrs. Thomas was with Mr. Marsden that he never went near her when he was with you the other day; and I think," added Miss Chorley with a knowing smile, "that Elizabeth was terribly disappointed."

"It is to be hoped she may never meet with a greater," replied Mostyn, who here brought the conversation to a close.

As he walked on, pondering over things collectively, and then giving a thought to this and a thought to that, he ended by trying to philosophise over the part each man is called on to act in life. After all, existence is but a so many act drama, either tragic, or comic, or melodramatic. If one would, or could, but live through it as we live through a play, wait and watch for events,

in the same manner that we deliberately go to a theatre and tarry, to have our feelings harrowed by a terrible tragedy, or our risible powers called into play by a well-acted farce, there would surely be an excitement, and something approaching to an enjoyment, attached to our sorrows and miseries that would render the dreariest of lives almost of daily interest, if not amusement.

It is a thousand pities we can't; or if we could do what would almost be as well, go through life heartless and regardless of all that concerned those belonging to us. It is well to say we should be debarred from many joys, maybe; but how many troubles should we be spared!

True, to live uncared for is not pleasant; but to live uncaring, is.

CHAPTER IX.

A MOMENTOUS QUESTION.

SUMMER had given way to autumn, autumn to winter, and winter to spring, and yet no visible change had taken place in any of those with whose history we are concerned.

Mrs. Singleton, after a few weeks' absence from town during the month of August, was well pleased to return to the same quarters in George street she had occupied from her first return to England. James Moncrieffe had insisted on his mother-in-law being rent-free whilst she chose to continue there; thus Mrs. Singleton felt less cramped in means, and more contented at remaining; and there was literally no actual necessity for her wintering in a warmer climate. She had, besides, the questionable benefit of her daughter's carriage at times; questionable, for it is very

much to be doubted if those sort of comforts which one is unable to obtain independently of others are not the source of more vexation in the end than pleasure. However, people differ on that head, and some think it well to have all they can get, no matter how it comes.

A singularly mild winter, and the advantages above alluded to, had prevented Mrs. Singleton having one passing regret at being in England; and for once she and Dacia were agreed that they were far better where they were. Dacia seemed loth even to leave London for the few weeks in summer that her health not only seemed to, but did, require. And when a very pressing invitation came for her mother and herself to spend Christmas at Christehurch with the Ashley Singletons, she refused. Mrs. Singleton even expressed a wish her daughter should go, though she herself declined. She could not, she said, be a guest where she had been mistress; but with Dacia it was different. Mrs. Ewart added her entreaties, but all in vain. And yet Dacia's home was not a whit more attractive than of yore; one would have thought she would gladly have escaped from

it for a time ; her mother's temper was not changed from what it ever was. A day did not pass but what she found something to complain of ; some neglect on her daughter's part, some carelessness in regard to her wishes. Poor girl ! she was never right ; but she was very resigned under it all ; she never murmured ; she bore all very patiently.

To Mrs. Moncrieffe it seemed quite marvellous ; she could not understand how Dacia put up with all she did.

" I think I would marry a tinker rather than stay at home to be so tormented," she said one day when Mrs. Singleton had gone beyond her usual nagging ; and had deliberately run through half-a-dozen sharp taunting sentences without waiting to use her scent-bottle between each, as was her general rule.

Dacia raised her large soft blue eyes, and fixed them steadily on her sister's face, as she said :

" It is my duty to bear it, so long as I am beneath the same roof."

" Then why, in Heaven's name, don't you get another ? Why don't you marry ? I can't understand you, Dacia. I could name a dozen men in

a breath who would be at your feet in an hour's time, if you only gave them the shadow of encouragement. And as to poor Henry Marsden, there he is throwing away his only chance of life by remaining in the fogs and damp of London, instead of being far away under a warm sun, simply because he hopes you may deign to look mercifully on him, and finally exclaim, 'Be happy; I am yours in life and in death.'"

"Don't joke, Cis, in that way on serious matters. I cannot tell you how it grieves me to think I am the cause of his having stayed in England this last winter. You know, Cis, I could not tell him myself—but you might—that I never can marry him; that I shall never marry at all."

"I shall say nothing of the kind. You are so silly, Dacia; I cannot think what romantic rubbish has got into your head about not marrying. Who *do* you like?—for there must be some one."

"No one," replied Dacia.

"I don't believe you, Dacia. It's not natural. A woman must love something, and a man is the most probable thing."

"Perhaps so, as a rule; but there may be ex-

ceptions, and I suppose I am one ; or else I may be unnatural, as you say."

"What are you two talking about?" exclaimed Mrs. Ewart, who walked in at this point, looking as cheery and cheerful as usual, though her heart at times ached sorely when she thought about her favourite niece's dreadful blindness ; but a year had passed by since she had entered the Church of Rome, and it is astonishing how time blunts the sharpness of regret, no matter what it is for.

"Never mind ; don't ask, Mum," whispered Dacia ; and she rose up and welcomed her aunt with a kiss.

"O, the old story, Mum," said Cecily ; "Dacia's ridiculous folly about never marrying. Why, what has a woman to do in this world if she does not marry?"

"Well, she may find plenty to do," replied her aunt, "and make herself very useful without marrying. Still, I agree with you, Cis, it is the natural step for her to take in life."

"And there is Mr. Marsden, I have just been telling Dacia, actually dying for her. The poor man is dreadful to see ; his cough is frightful, he

is not fit to leave his bed, and yet Dacia won't put him out of his misery; and she is wretched at home. Mamma has been attacking her this afternoon worse than ever, and now she has gone off by herself in a gale."

"But how can I do any thing, Cecily? Why will you talk such nonsense? You know very well I cannot go and tell Mr. Marsden I won't marry him, when he has never asked me."

"Well, he shall do so without delay, I promise you," exclaimed Mrs. Moncrieffe, in her wild thoughtless manner; and without letting her sister and aunt offer a word of remonstrance, she wished them a hurried good-bye, and left.

"I hope Cecily won't do any thing foolish," said Dacia.

"No, dear; I think there is no fear. She will forget all about it by the time she gets home. But what is this about your mamma? What has put her out more than usual to-day?"

"I don't know, Mum; nothing new. If Maxwell forgets any thing, it is instantly my fault. To-day it was nothing more than finding my bedroom door locked when she came to it."

“But why do you lock your door, Dacia?”

“Because the servant of the house will come bolting in without knocking, and I cannot bear it.”

It was, as Dacia said, “nothing new.” Her mother’s irritability of temper had increased very considerably of late, and the merest trifle caused strife in the house. It must be owned Dacia herself was not over-conciliatory; that is, she absented herself so much, that her mother might—had she complained of that—have had some just reason; but what she did find fault at was Dacia’s unbreakable silence. She avoided answering completely unless to a direct question, and then it was either “yes” or “no”—never more; and the first moment’s pause that ensued, she escaped from the room.

As it takes two to fight, so Mrs. Singleton found when with her daughter the battle was all on one side; she sent for Maxwell, or the landlady, or the servant of the house—any one, in short, who would show fight in return; and then, when she was utterly worsted, she gathered her shawl around her, and leaning back and closing her

eyes, declared herself very ill, and desired to be left alone—an order always promptly and cheerfully carried out.

“Why do you not go away for a little, Dacia?” said her aunt; “it would do you good, and would cheer you up.”

“I would rather stay here, Mum.”

Mrs. Ewart sighed—a hard bitter sigh. Whenever a word was said that brought back to her mind what Dacia had become, she gave way beneath the sorrow it called forth. It was a terrible break-down to all her hopes; for Dacia seemed so utterly crushed in body and mind. For long she had ceased to talk on the one question that had wrought this change in her darling. But very distantly and casually, it had never been mooted since the day Dacia had fancied she saw Mr. Way kneeling before the altar at St. Wilfred’s.

There still lived the root of affection in her heart; but Father Leigh had lopped off all the branches; there was nothing visible; all there was remained unseen. Tenderly nursed, it would have burst forth again into existence; but that was not to be: as he had used the shears for the blossoms,

so now did he use the axe for the more obstinate work, but slowly—as he did all things.

Mrs. Ewart knew this ; ay, as well as the reverend father himself. She knew perfectly how the work of destruction had been carried on ; first by undermining the body, and thus rendering the mind little capable of offering resistance. But Mrs. Ewart did not know the worst. Father Leigh had, by arguments and persuasions, and occasionally using intimidation, at length brought Dacia to give a promise that she would decide before the feast of St. Wilfred—a great day with the Fathers—whether she would serve God or Mammon for the remainder of her life.

The feast was nearing, and yet Dacia wavered. Night and day did she pray and think. She weighed every point for—and they were so many, but all of Father Leigh's putting forward—and every point against ; and still she hesitated. An unseen influence (who's was it—God's or the devil's?) appeared to hold her back ; she tried to shake it off ; she argued with herself that her life within the walls of a convent would be so peaceful, so quiet, so full of deeds of love and charity, that

no thought of the outer world could penetrate there to disturb her in her devotions; that all human love would die within her in presence of that great unbounded devotion she would experience for higher things which could never exercise its power over her till she cast off all communication with those who now more than shared her affections.

Then the questions thrust themselves forward unsought for: would she feel that peace and quiet? Would the events passing in the outer world not reach her? Would she be able to crush out one feeling that yet clung with such terrible tenacity that nothing had been able to tear it out? She paused. No reply came. No conviction followed, even when she recalled Father Leigh's unanswerable arguments. No conviction followed—perhaps was further off than ever—when she went to the Convent of St. Paul, and spent some hours with the reverend mother and the good sisters.

A something struck even her warped mind—so great and large a year back—as pitiful and paltry in their lives. They were more like overgrown children; little things pleased them; little

things pained them. Old and middle-aged—of young there were very few, and of Dacia's standing none—were childish alike in their questions. Dacia felt convinced their manner was assumed; they talked with unnatural enthusiasm of their happy life; of their love for each other; of the goodness of the Lady Superior, and their devotion to her; of the chances of a new confessor being appointed to their convent; of his being a convert, and once a clergyman in the Church of England. Then came their meal at noon in the refectory—the food of the simplest kind, though good; but Dacia did not stay to partake of it.

She then passed into the little chapel adjoining the convent; and there she found two or three nuns studded about in fervent prayer; and it was here she felt the first feeling of peace steal over her. There was something very touching in seeing these women; their spirits communing with such earnestness with their God, that the unusual sound at that hour of the door opening and shutting did not cause one of them even to raise her eyes. Dacia knelt down amongst them; but her thoughts wandered; instead of praying,

she was unconsciously thinking about the step she was being so urged to take; and when she rose from her knees, and went out into the wide open space in front of the convent, the sun shining brightly, and the old trees that are still studded about this spot looking fresh and green, with the clear sky above her, she felt a shiver pass over her, as she thought of the house she had just left becoming her future home. And yet it would be from choice if she went there; it would be by her own decision, though her will was no longer her own.

She still had four days more; and they seemed to pass by rapidly; too rapidly, for the poor girl seemed to become less decided and more confused than she had been when first the subject was mooted. She went to Father Leigh; but he pretended it would be wrong for him to bias her—that it was a matter for her own heart and conscience to decide. God help her! Her heart and conscience had little left to say for itself; they had become the tools of her confessor—he knew that; he knew he was safe in leaving her to what he falsely called her own will. She had none but

his. He did tell her to pray ; and that she did ; but prayer, just then, brought no comfort ; for she felt it was her lips only, and not her heart, that asked for God's guidance.

She was sitting in her own room, reading one of the books Father Leigh had recommended her to study, when Maxwell came and told her Mrs. Singleton wished to speak to her. She went down, and found Henry Marsden sitting with her mother. Her first impulse was to withdraw ; a sudden presentiment flashed across her that she was not sent for to see him merely as a visitor ; but before she could carry out her intention, Mrs. Singleton said in a more kindly tone than she had addressed her daughter in for many a long day :

“Dacia, dear child, Mr. Marsden has come here to-day to ask me to give him leave to win away from me all I possess in the world ; and he has pleaded his cause so well, I have not been able to refuse him ; but I hardly know what you will say ; therefore I must leave you to answer for yourself.”

And before Dacia knew what to reply, her mother had left the room, and Henry Marsden

was standing over her, earnestly imploring her to listen to him, and pouring into her ear the history of his long-enduring love. The tone of his voice, his terribly altered appearance, altogether upset Dacia, who, in her own state, was hardly equal to stand any great excitement unmoved; and yet she commanded her tears, though her voice faltered, and her cheeks flushed brightly, as she said:

“Stop, Mr. Marsden; I ought not to let you go on; for some day, perhaps, you will regret it. I ought to have stopped you before; but I could not. I feel so grieved, so sorry, that I am afraid you have misunderstood me. I like you so much; I always did; but I cannot be your wife.”

Marsden let drop the little hand he held so fast, and a terrible pallor overspread his face, yet his voice was firm and clear; he showed no other sign of weakness.

“Miss Singleton, I know I am not half good enough for you—not half; but I thought, I hoped—ay, I prayed I might win your love. Can it never be? Can you not leave me a shadow of hope?”

“It would not be worth having, if I did, for it would not be true. We can always be friends, can we not?” she said, holding out her hand to him.

“Yes; but friendship, however sincere, is but a cold substitute for love.”

“You will find some one better worth your affection than I am, and will I hope and trust yet be happy, whilst I—”

“Whilst you what?” he asked anxiously.

“O, whilst I am far away, and out of reach of seeing it.”

Henry Marsden was silent a moment, and then said:

“My friend Mostyn is coming to England next month; he was unable to fulfil his promise of last year; and I so hoped I might have been able to tell him of my happiness. I built such castles in the air, Miss Singleton, and in my own mind arranged plans for the future that are now all blown to the winds. It was dreadfully conceited of me, was it not? Do you forgive me?”

He tried to speak cheerily; but it was a bitter disappointment he had to endure.

“Forgive you! What have I to forgive? It is I who must unconsciously have allowed you to think that—”

“No, no, Miss Singleton. I was fool enough not to be able to distinguish friendship from love.—I will leave you now. In the first place, I have to gather together all my scattered hopes, pack them up, and bury them in a heap; and in the next, you will be glad to get rid of me.”

“Is Mr. Mostyn going to make any stay in England?” asked Dacia, in a hesitating, trembling tone, as Henry Marsden had his hand on the handle of the door.

“I hope three months. You know he failed last autumn in obtaining leave, and so he will endeavour to make as long a stay as he can this. His mother is very anxious to keep him, if possible, till October. She is coming to town to meet him, for he wishes to be a few weeks in London. Then I lay siege to him; and I had hoped you and Mrs. Singleton would have brightened my northern home at the same time. I may still hope that, may I not? You promised me your friendship; give me this proof of it.”

As he spoke, he moved a few steps nearer to her, with an anxious look in his eyes; the startled expression natural to him was subdued for the moment. His pale face flushed for an instant as he waited her reply. It seemed as if a remnant of hope might still be left him, if she consented. She promised, but conditionally; a simple enough condition it seemed to him; but had he better understood it, it would have been a more perfect annihilation of all hope than her firm refusal to become his wife had been.

“If I am disengaged at the time you ask us, I will promise,—if mamma consents,—to accompany her.”

So they parted; and on this earth they never met again.

When Mrs. Singleton heard Henry Marsden go downstairs, she knew what had been the result of the interview. Disappointment was the feeling that first came uppermost in her breast, yet there was a mixture below the surface. On the one hand, she had pictured to herself Dacia married to a man whose worldly position was past all re-

proach, who could not possibly live, and therefore she would be left a wealthy widow; and then the natural consequence ensue, and the proper step for her to take would be, to have her mother to reside with her. Once more, then, might she revel in all the comforts and luxuries of former days; and even if the man lived, she would be better off than she was now; for she had an inward conviction that Dacia would do more for her than Cecily did. On the other—and this side of the picture was not half so clearly defined—she felt that Dacia never really cared for Henry Marsden; and therefore the chances were her marriage with him—knowing in her heart Dacia's deep intensity of feeling—would not have proved a happy one. She was a mother; and rarely as a mother's feelings were roused within her, yet they existed; but what she herself had missed was what for the instant warped her tongue into uttering ungenerous words.

“Your own face, and Mr. Marsden's short interview with you, tell me the result of it. All I can hope, Dacia, is that the day may never come

when you will reap the fruits of your heartless conduct towards that man. You have gone on and on, from the first night you met him, playing with his feelings, till you have brought him to death's door; and now, when you have fairly forced him to come to the point, you reject him with, I suppose, the same indifference you would had he asked you to dance with him, and you were disinclined to do so."

"Mamma, you are most unjust!" And the poor girl's face flushed up with anger. "I never led Mr. Marsden to suppose I felt more for him than for any other of our acquaintances. He himself would not accuse me of such heartlessness." And Dacia, her head erect, and her bosom heaving with suppressed emotion, walked out of the room.

Mrs. Singleton was so surprised, she forgot to be angry; but afterwards, when talking it over with Mrs. Ewart, she whined over her wretched position, saying that, but for Dacia's overbearing nature, it might be endured; but with a heartless, selfish, undutiful child, it was almost unbearable.

Mrs. Ewart was silent. Dacia's faults and failings were never discussed by her with her sister-in-law.

CHAPTER X.

THE CLEANSING FIRE.

THE afternoon had faded into twilight, and night was fast approaching, though the days were at their longest; and yet Dacia Singleton still sat, her fair face buried in her hands, pondering over her past; that past which she was about to condemn for ever to oblivion by her own blind mad folly. She had now resolved—since her interview with Henry Marsden—to renounce the world, with all its heart-sorrows and misery. A resolution taken is a better pillow to sleep on than indecision; and Dacia felt more at ease and more peaceful than she had done for months past. This deceptive calmness misled her; she thought she was reaping the fruits of doing right, as Father Leigh impressed on her she would.*

One of Dacia's mistakes was imagining she could rely on herself, that she was not deceived in her own powers; and yet whenever a struggle

really took place, she was soon conquered. It was this very unrecognised weakness that now drove her to determine on entering a convent. She had not the strength to meet Hugh Mostyn without succumbing to her great love for him. She felt—but she refused to admit it—that it still lived as fresh and strong as in the first days of bursting into life; and instead, therefore, of trying to meet the evil and overcome it, she went on one side and tried to pass by without encountering it. It is a common trick with a woman, but none the less dangerous.

So when Dacia reached St. Wilfred's, and went into the parlour to wait till Father Leigh was disengaged, she had none of the misgivings and doubts that had haunted her so long. They had all vanished, and she fancied she felt happy. Yet there was a restlessness in her eyes, and a nervous haste in her movements, that Father Leigh detected before he had been with her five minutes. Something made him think it might be wiser if he receded a little, the better to leap; or, in other words, if he offered a little opposition, in order to hasten on and make doubly sure the end.

“You have taken a long time, my child, to decide. Are you quite sure of yourself? are you thoroughly convinced you have no lingering wish to remain in the world? has its attraction entirely ceased for you; not one single feeling drawing you back? Reflect well before you answer me.”

“None,” replied Dacia instantly; “I feel as anxious about it now, Father Leigh, as I was undecided before. When shall I be able to go? Will the rev. mother be able to receive me next week?”

“Next week! That is soon. I cannot tell you; I must go to St. Paul’s first. Have you told Mrs. Singleton yet?”

“No,” replied Dacia; “not yet. I intended doing so after seeing you.”

“My daughter, that shows a want of courage. I think I told you at your last confession your mother should be made acquainted with the blessed change that has been wrought in you. Implicit obedience and blind submission to the authority of the Church is essential from all its children.”

The words grated on Dacia’s ears, and she made no answer.

“When were you last at confession, my child?”

“On Saturday.”

“It would be as well perhaps if you were now to come into the church and unburden your conscience of any sin that may be weighing on it.”

“I did not come prepared for confession, Father Leigh.”

“No matter, my daughter; go and commune with yourself for half an hour before the Blessed Sacrament, and I will come to you. You will be ready for me then.”

Dacia without a word rose and passed out of the parlour along the dimly-lighted corridor straight into the church. It was nearly empty; only a few women were studded about here and there before the various small chapels that every niche contained; some kneeling, some sitting, all with a rosary in their hands.

After a few minutes given to earnest prayer, she followed her confessor's directions, and began to pass before her recollection every thought, word, and deed of the last few days. When she came to her interview with Marsden, a chill crept

over her ; she knew what the questioning on that subject would entail. She thought over it till her face grew white and worn with the bitter struggle. She knew the sharpness of the probe that was used ; she knew there was not a thought or feeling that would not be laid bare and dissected. A feeling well-nigh approaching to rebellion against God arose in her breast, when she thought of the torture she had to go through when following out the commands of the Church in regard to confession. If it were only sins committed and not sins of thought that had to be told, she could have gone forward bravely. Why did God, she asked herself, under pain of everlasting damnation force on his creatures such an ordeal ? Father Leigh called it a “cleansing fire ;” but somehow or another Dacia had never thoroughly seen it in that light. A fire, truly, as far as torture went, but like the iron when put in the furnace, it there becomes red-hot and clean-looking, but after it is taken out and cools, it is black and dirty still—and *that* dirt is produced from the fire it has passed through. Is it not the same with the confessional ?

When Dacia had thought till she could think no more, without making a chaos of her entire brain, she sat down on a front bench, waiting till Father Leigh should pass to his confessional box. Her large sad eyes were fixed on a very fine painting, which represented the crowning by the Blessed Virgin of one of the sisters of St. Paul's—the sisterhood of which she was herself so soon to become a member. The nun's face wore that melancholy resigned expression which seems habitual to them; but it was very beautiful, which certainly is not so habitual. Dacia wondered what special act she had performed which had gained her such a distinction; and then she wondered whether she had ever loved with an earthly love some erring earthly mortal.

Then she fell into a long train of bewildering conjectures and fancies, ending by wondering why God ever permitted the Virgin Mary to entertain a love such as hers must have been for Joseph. For whatever shape it took after the angel's Salutation, it must have been of the ordinary kind when she consented to espouse him; and yet *she* was told to cast aside all love for the things and

people of this world, and set her affections wholly and entirely on things above; that she was to leave her mother and home without a regret. Why might she not do, at any rate, what the Mother of our Saviour did? She loved her mother and clung to her; she—

Her wanderings were cut short here happily by the tall slight figure of Father Leigh passing before her, and for the moment shutting out from her view the picture of the favoured nun. She followed him slowly and dreamily, and then knelt down on his left-hand side. For a few moments there was silence; then the murmured Latin prayer; and then he spoke:

“I fancied, my child, you had something on your conscience—something distressing you; and I know so well from experience the inexplicable relief and comfort a good confession gives, that I thought I would suggest your making one. Am I right? is any thing weighing on you?”

“No, father.”

“I do not mean in the shape of mortal sin, but rebellious thoughts and wishes. I will put a few questions to you, my child, to help you;

and by that means I may be enabled to discover what perhaps is even hid from yourself. Were you at Mass on Sunday?"

"Yes."

"Did your thoughts stray away during service? Were your prayers such as they ought to be? Did you risk asking that which might not be in accordance with God's and the Blessed Virgin's purity?"

"I think not, father; but my thoughts may have wandered occasionally."

"Have you omitted your morning or evening prayers?"

"No."

"Have you spoken disrespectfully to your mother, or done any thing contrary to filial duty?"

"Nothing, unless deceiving her as to my religion."

"That, my daughter, is not deception. Up to a certain point the commands of the Church were such that you did right in keeping from her your blessed change; but I told you on Saturday you ought now to make her acquainted with God's

grace towards you ; and your not having done so was a sin, *because* the holy Church desired you, but a venial one only. You have not wished for the death of any one, or harm to befall any one ?”

“No.”

“Nor any kind of evil to them?”

“I think not.”

I wish it were here possible to give you in detail the remaining questions that were put to Dacia Singleton. I wish it for the sake of those who might perhaps thus be put on their guard ; but I cannot. They were questions, reader, that if you are a young and modest woman you could not conceive, nor barely understand ; and if a man, and you have never heard the license the confessional admits of, you would cast this book aside, and declare it to be false and impossible. And yet I defy the most prolific imagination to go beyond the truth, if even they come up to it.

It is well the penitent—if a woman—sees not the priest’s face ; could she, if she did, answer him ? Does any woman ever dare to raise her eyes towards that close grating—so close that all

is dark behind it—whilst she is being cross-questioned, and her innermost thoughts and feelings dragged to the surface and laid bare before her, that even she herself had no notion what form they wore, till her confessor exhibits them to her, and makes her view them with his eyes; thus rendering them hideous indeed?

Sin is born in us, grows with us, and remains with us; but is that a reason why crimes such as many women may live and die ignorant even of their very existence, should be asked if they have ever committed them? Is that a reason for defiling the mind by pointing out the sinfulness of feelings that have hitherto been regarded in all purity and simplicity. To the pure all things are pure; to the priest of Father Leigh's type all things are impure. Age has naught to do with it; perhaps years but increase the evil.

Though it is impossible to give you a nearer insight into Father Leigh's mode of confessing his penitent, I can tell you that he gained his object. He learnt of Miss Singleton's interview with Henry Marsden; he drew out from her, as well as her memory permitted, every word that passed between

them ; and when he heard of Mostyn's expected arrival, he at once saw what had caused the turning of the scale in favour of her retiring into a convent, and weighed it down so heavily. He felt now it required little prevarication to induce her to take the step speedily, but still he could not do it in a straightforward manner. He endeavoured, but he failed :

"Chassez le naturel, il revient au galop."

Wiliness was natural to him ; and if he ever tried to cast it aside and be sincere, he did it so clumsily that it was not difficult to see it was assumed. Therefore, when Dacia received absolution and the reverend father's blessing, he told her to be at St. Wilfred's on Sunday for vespers, and he would afterwards tell her what day she could be received into the Convent of St. Paul.

Miss Singleton walked home in any thing but a contented frame of mind ; she experienced a feeling of dissatisfaction she could hardly explain to herself. It was so different from the going ; then she felt satisfied she was doing right, and was peaceful in consequence. Still all was the same now as then : nothing had been said that altered the phase of

things. She hardly expected Father Leigh would have been able to fix the day for her leaving her mother's roof till he had consulted the superior of the convent. True, she had a painful task before her, in telling her mother; but it was not that she felt oppress her; neither did the thought of the sorrow she knew she would inflict upon her good kind aunt weigh with her then; it was something else—something she could not, or dared not define.

She had already learnt the peculiarity belonging to many Roman Catholics, young in the faith, of walking with the eyes cast down. It arises from different causes with different people. With some, as with Miss Singleton, it arose from a dislike to meet people she knew, and running the chance of being stopped by them, and asked as to where she had been in *that* neighbourhood. "What in the world brings you down here?" was a question she was wearied of answering. She found by not seeing any one herself, she more often remained unseen, or, at any rate, unnoticed. With many it is from deep thought, the mind being more easily condensed to one subject when the eye does not come in contact with a mass of people and things.

With a few it may be from a feeling of shame, not liking to meet face to face, or be seen by those who they know ridicule them.

She had entered the Park at Albert-gate, thus intending to get back to George-street by the quietest road she could; which, however, at this season was any thing but quiet—carriages blocking up the roads, people standing looking at them, thus rendering the foot-paths nearly impassable. Still this was better than Piccadilly, where every other person she met might be known to her; whereas she had only to contend with the multitudes now at the crossings. In her present state of mind, the person she least desired to see was Mrs. Ewart; and as singularly often it happens in life that all we least wish we find comes to pass, so did Dacia find Mum's shadow cross her path, and herself intercept her progress, just as she was congratulating herself that she had got through the Park crowds without being interrupted by any one.

Mrs. Ewart had no occasion to ask where her niece had been; she knew as well as if she had accompanied her; but she did exclaim at the pace she was going at.

"My dear Dacia, what are you rushing along for in this hot sun, as if some one's existence depended on your getting to a certain spot in a given time? It is enough to put you in a fever."

"I have got into the habit of walking quickly when alone," replied her niece; "I am only going home. Where are you going, Mum?"

"I was going to see Miss Skinner; I hear she is not quite well."

"Is it of much importance your going now, Mum? or could you delay it till to-morrow?"

"Why, child; do you want me to do any thing for you?"

"Walk home with me, Mum."

On seeing Mrs. Ewart, Dacia had come to the instant resolve of telling her the first of the step she was about to take; and there was something in her tone, when asking her aunt to walk home with her, that Mrs. Ewart felt a matter of moment urged her niece to make the request.

"Of course, my dear, I will. No visit I could have to pay could ever be of more importance to me than complying with your wishes."

"Dear Mum!" said Dacia in a soft affectionate tone.

They walked on together for a short time in perfect silence. Then Dacia spoke, feeling that there was not any great distance to go before reaching her home; and her mother might be in, which would prevent any private conversation with her aunt.

"I have something to tell you, Mum; something that I think will not please you; but you must know it sooner or later; and I prefer your knowing it before I tell mamma."

Dacia stopped; Mrs. Ewart made no answer. A fear was creeping over her, and her heart beat. After a full minute's pause, Dacia went on:

"Do you guess what it is, Mum?"

"How can I guess, child? I was never clever at unravelling mysteries."

Then Dacia spoke slowly, and her sweet voice sounded like a muffled bell tolling her own death-knell.

"I am going into a convent."

A sharp pain, such as might be caused by the quick and sudden thrust of a dagger, passed

through Mrs. Ewart's breast. She was a woman little subject to visible emotion ; she rarely gave way to tears ; she seldom even lost command over her voice ; but it was in a strangely thick and indistinct tone that she said in a few moments after :

“ I would rather you had told me you were going to your grave, child.”

“ Try and think that I am, Mum,” replied Dacia, with a wearied expression.

“ Ah, Dacia, it is easy to talk. You little know what you are doing ; you are acting under the influence that terrible Church brings to bear on all those she wishes to entrap ; and when too late you will awake with a bitterness you little think possible now to the horrors of your position.”

“ How, Mum ? The influence you say they use, is it not for good ? Do they not devote their whole lives to good works ? and if they try to gain over converts to the faith, does it not show a disinterested wish to save those that, till circumstances drew them in contact with, they perhaps were wholly ignorant of ? ”

“No, it does not. No Roman Catholic priest was ever guilty of a disinterested act in his life. In *this* country you find them, I admit, entrapping the poor and ignorant, as well as the rich and educated; but they do so, as the *prestige* they gain at head-quarters through the quantity of pervers (not quality, remember) they make, often in the end brings them promotion. You would not find Catholic priests in Catholic countries exerting themselves to make proselytes; and why? because they would get no reward in the way of aggrandisement; and as to the reward a good conscience gives, believe me, my dear child, no man who has intellect enough to make conversions, as they call it, *can* believe a third of the doctrines they promulgate. O, Dacia, stop in time; it is not too late. I will not ask you to think of the heart-aches and misery you will create, for that ought not to weigh, if you were about to do something acceptable to God; but I ask you for your soul’s sake, for your salvation’s sake, to take time to consider, if you will do nothing more.”

“I have considered it well, Mum,” said Dacia

in a way as if she felt incapable of battling with the subject.

“Not enough, then; there can be no immediate hurry. Take a year from this time to study the question; to ponder well all there is to be said against as well as for such a religion; to weigh seriously the opinions of those great men whose whole lives have been spent in searching deeply and thoroughly into all connected with the system pursued by the Papal Church; and who one and all, together with some of the very best and sincerest of their own followers, condemn the monastic life. O, the very thought of your being in one of those dens of iniquity makes my blood run cold within me! They are the hot-beds of all the evil passions mankind inherits, fostered and tended by—in convents for women—the priests. You could no more live in one of them, Dacia, if a shade of your original nature is left to you, than I could. Here you are at home, my darling; so I will leave you.”

“No, no, Mum; come in with me. I am going to tell mamma.”

Mrs. Ewart followed her niece into the house.

Mrs. Singleton had visitors with her ; so they neither of them joined her till she was alone again.

“How very dismal you look, Ursula !” was her sister-in-law’s greeting. “Really, if any one in the world has reason to be cheerful, I think it is yourself ; if I looked as you do, it would not be to be wondered at. As to Dacia, I expect nothing from her now but gloominess ;” and Mrs. Singleton inhaled her salts, and then fanned herself.

“Mamma, the reason Mum is looking out of spirits is on account of something I have told her.” Dacia had resolved to get over her task at once.

“Then I think, Dacia, it would have been more becoming if you had told your mother first. But I ought to be accustomed to every thing in the shape of contempt and undutifulness from you.”

“I have not told you before, mamma, as I feared it might pain you.”

“Very considerate ; you are not always so.”

Dacia’s bright red lips contracted, but she made no retort ; she went on quietly and calmly, and informed her mother, first of her change of

faith, and then of the resolution she had formed of entering a convent.

“Barbara,” moaned forth Mrs. Ewart, “use all your endeavours to save your child from such a fate. For God’s sake, let her for once see the mother within you; she will not be able to resist your pleading, for she loves you dearly.” Her voice shook, and her lips quivered, but no tears came to the poor woman’s relief.

“Really, Ursula, with your strong mind and body, I am astonished to see you like this. And what can I do? It is very hard upon me to be subject to witness scenes like this. If Dacia takes any thing into her head, there is no use in asking me to make her change her intention; she always does as she likes, and I suppose always will.”

It was a hard trial to Dacia; her aunt’s bitter sorrow would have made her waver, had she not at that moment called to mind that before many weeks were passed Hugh Mostyn would be in England, and perhaps standing in the room she was then in. Could she meet him with a heart deadened to love? No; a thousand times no! That thought sealed her fate. She went up

to her aunt, and, twining her arms lovingly round her, whispered in her ear:

“It is too late, dearest aunt; I have pledged my word, and it is best so. Hugh Mostyn will be here before a month has passed.”

Then Mrs. Ewart knew there was no hope. She saw now the weapon that had been used to drive her to take so terrible a step. Her heart felt well-nigh broken as she rose, and kissing Dacia almost convulsively, she left the room and house without uttering a word, leaving the mother and child alone. She went forth feeling as if this were Dacia's death-day; the funeral—perhaps the bitterest moment of all—had yet to come.

“Your aunt might have wished me good-bye, I think,” said Mrs. Singleton presently; “people's manners seem to get worse every day.”

“She was agitated, mamma,” said Dacia, who was now calm again, she herself having been upset by her aunt's emotion.

“Agitated! such nonsense. And because of this folly of yours. Really, Dacia, if you think you will be happier shut up like a lunatic, I have no objection to your trying it.”

“Very well, mamma.”

“But I must say that any thing to equal your selfishness I never met with.” Mrs. Singleton inhaled her salts, and spoke languidly. “My wishes are never consulted, nor my likings; therefore your change will make little to me. If you had married decently and respectably, I might have perhaps had a little comfort in you. But now I suppose you will end by marrying a priest.”

“Marry a priest, mamma! What are you saying?”

“Well, that is generally the result of people living together as brothers and sisters.”

“But I am not going to live with any priests. You don’t quite understand it, mamma,” continued Dacia in a quieter tone, but feeling inwardly irritated. She had not the patience, either, to explain to her mother the simple facts.

“All I hope is your new religion will teach you what is meant by duty. As far as the actual belief goes, I think one religion as good as another; but I think yours cannot be worth much, if it is the cause of your being so morose and dismal of late.”

“I do not think my religion made me unhappy, mamma.”

“I did not say unhappy. I suppose it was some folly connected with it made you refuse Henry Marsden. You will be sorry for that some day.”

“I think not ; but my reason for refusing him you know very well, mamma, was because I did not love him.”

“Love him ! Such romantic nonsense ; as if love were necessary ! However, there is no use in talking to you about it ; you pleased yourself, and I hope you won’t regret it.”

And so the subject dropped. It was a relief to Dacia that her mother did not take it in another spirit, as she had feared.

With all her sorrows, Dacia Singleton’s past was a soft and easy pillow for her memory to repose on, compared with the hereafter she was building up with blinded eyes and deafened ears, and a mind that had been crushed to disable it from acting when the time came that it might otherwise have exerted its powers.

CHAPTER XI.

DOWN IN THE DEPTHS.

IF a woman ever wavers in decision, she invariably chooses the wrong side. Her only chance of doing wisely is by following the first impression she receives, or the first promptings of instinct; for I am inclined to think it is instinct which is more developed in woman than intellect. If she would but always follow it, the chances are she would not so often make false moves, or bring down such sorrow on herself and others, as it seems she so incessantly has the ill-luck to do.

A very strange phase in woman is her uncertainty. You can never feel sure of her but on one point; of that presently. To-day she may be clear in her judgment and wise in her opinions, whilst to-morrow she will be unjust and unfair. This is not from her instinct failing her.

It arises from no incapacity, but simply from an unseen bias at work within her, and which, from jealousy or some other powerful passion, prompts her to take a wrongful view. To-day she may act judiciously and with apparent discrimination, whilst to-morrow she will be guilty of the grossest piece of folly a human being can commit.

A woman can be trusted thoroughly but in one single thing, and that is affection. Gain that completely, and you may stake your life on her fidelity and truth. She will remain as firm as a rock through good and evil, and as alive to your interests as you could be yourself; but don't trust her beyond the mark where affection ceases to influence; if you do, you may be sure she will stray about seeking for what she has wandered away from, and perhaps meeting it in a more attractive, if less genuine form. I am now speaking of a woman who is one in every acceptation of the name—loving, depending, trusting, and confiding; not a woman who has run the gauntlet of the world, and is more of a man in her independence and knowledge of it. They may prefer leading to being led, and commanding to

obeying; and they generally not only prefer it, but carry out their preference.

Of this latter kind was Maria Langen. She had not the heart capable of entertaining a pure generous love; nor had she an intellect formed that could be guided by affection. She was thoroughly acquainted with the world and its ways. She was as quick in perception, and more so than many of her sex; but she also committed as egregious blunders as the weakest of them, and, like the rest, could not learn that regretting was utter waste of time, besides undermining the capacity for the future.

She had wavered in her decision when the option was given her of going to America or remaining in England, and so she chose the one that appeared the most pleasant, thinking the only drawback to it was about to be removed; and that simply from a vague surmise contained in a letter accident threw in her way. A man would not have permitted so slight and indefinite an assertion to have weighed a fly's wing in the balance; but a woman, when she thinks, comes to conclusions formed by the way her wishes tend, in such

an extraordinary manner that, even in so momentous a matter as this was, she could not cast aside her nature, and endeavour for once to view both sides of the question calmly and dispassionately. She saw it all one way, though she pretended to think it over evenly. Had she followed her first impulse—to go—she would have done rightly; as it was, she was now about to reap the fruits arising from indecision.

A year had elapsed since Count Langen had had the post of *Chargé d’Affaires* in New York offered him, which he had refused, and then telegraphed to accept; but which telegram, being unintelligible when it was delivered at its destination, failed to obtain his wishes, thus obliging him to remain where he was.

The nervous fear that at first kept the Countess Langen in one incessant state of anxiety gradually subsided as day after day went by uninterrupted by any events that she so dreaded. Hope revived within her, and confidence in her own good fortune reasserted itself. But one thing tended to vex and annoy her; it was Henry Marsden’s remaining in London during the last winter; she

felt harassed by it. She knew the man was inimical to her, and would, if the opportunity presented itself, make her feel the power he held over her by the possession of the secret connected with her past life.

But this bugbear was now removed, for immediately after his interview with Miss Singleton he went to the north, intending to remain there till he left England for the winter ; but this, like many intentions, was not carried out, as subsequent events very shortly brought him back to London.

Cecily Moncrieffe informed the Countess of his departure. "I know you have an unreasonable antipathy against the poor fellow," she said, "therefore I give it you as good news ; but I am very disappointed at my sister's refusal of him. It would have been a very good match for her."

"Good matches are not always suitable ones ; besides, your sister may like some one else."

"I don't know who it can be, then, unless that gloomy man Mr. Mostyn, that poor Henry Marsden brought here. You did not see him, did you ?"

"No ; I was at Brighton at the time ; but you

told me of his coming. And do you think Miss Singleton likes him?" She asked the question in a low quiet tone; but her eyes had a strange expression in them.

"O, I don't know; you suggested her liking some one, and I could think of no one else; and what, perhaps, makes me think more of him than another is, that she is going into a convent—going to turn nun! I could hardly believe my senses when I first heard it; but *chacun à son goût*, you know; therefore, as she likes it, there is nothing to prevent her carrying out her purpose. But I heard that the Dunkerque Consul will never marry; and so putting that and that together, I have come to the conclusion she has fallen in love with him, and as she can't marry him, is going to shut herself up in one of those awful places; there is nothing else that could account for such madness. I would as soon, and sooner, go to prison myself. Just fancy living with a heap of women, and but one man to be seen, and that only occasionally! I couldn't stand it—could you?" But the Countess had clearly not heard half Mrs. Moncrieffe had been saying; she was pondering over in

her own mind in what way, if the occasion offered itself, Miss Singleton's supposed attachment to Mr. Mostyn might be turned to account.

"I wonder why Mr. Mostyn will not marry," she said.

"For some stupid piece of romance, I have no doubt. I shall not be surprised to hear he has turned monk," exclaimed Mrs. Monerieffe with a merry laugh. "A charming couple he and Dacia would make then; it would be a sort of Heloise and Abelard story over again, I suppose."

It was fully three weeks after this conversation that the Countess Langen was sitting in her boudoir filling up cards of invitation for a dinner, when she was interrupted by the entrance of a servant bearing a letter to her on a silver waiter.

"An answer is required, my lady."

"Very well; put it down on the little table; I will ring for you when I want you.—I must finish these cards first," she said to herself, when the man had closed the door, "or I shall be making some mistake about them."

She might have saved herself the trouble, however.

Fully ten minutes elapsed before Maria Langen completed her task, and then she reached across to a small table of Florentine mosaic, on which she had directed the letter to be laid. She took it up, and was about to break the seal, when she turned it and looked at the address. In an instant a ghastly pallor overspread her features, which was rendered even more terrible from the tinge of rouge she usually wore. All her limbs trembled, and for a moment there came a sensation over her as of every drop of blood ascending from her feet and hands to her head; and then a shivering feeling followed. She had to wait a minute before she was physically capable of reading the letter; then she broke the seal, and read as follows:

“ Mr. Hugh Mostyn, having a communication to make to the Countess Langen, thinks a personal interview will be more advisable than a correspondence. The Countess Langen can appoint her own time and place, should she accede to Mr. Mostyn’s suggestion.

“ Athenæum Club, 19th July.”

She felt almost stunned for a time ; she felt the dreaded and dreadful blow was at last about to fall on her head. She knew there was no escape ; she knew it as well as she knew there was a God in heaven ; and yet her brain was already bewildering itself to find out a method of eluding what was inevitable. How long she sat uselessly spending her talents in vain plans, she hardly knew ; but she was roused by a footstep approaching. She had barely time to thrust the letter into her pocket before her husband walked in.

“What is the matter, dear Maria?” was his instant exclamation.

“Nothing,” she said with nervous haste ; her large brown eyes glancing up at him for a moment.

“You have been tiring yourself, my pet, writing all these ;” and as he spoke he shuffled up the invitation-cards that lay spread about over the table. “And there is a messenger downstairs waiting for an answer to some letter. What is it about ? can I answer it for you ?”

“No, dear George, thank you,” she said, with difficulty keeping her voice steady, his kind tone and manner having on her over-strung

nerves produced a reaction ; and the immensity of misery she feared that soon would burst upon him blazing out before her with a fearful glare.

She rang the bell, reaching it by the aid of a chair that stood mid-way, or she would have staggered otherwise; her legs refused to support her. "I will send an answer, will you tell the person who is waiting, in the course of the evening," she said to the servant; and when he left the room, she turned to her husband and said, "Will you dine at Lady Marlow's without me to-night? My head aches so, I think I must send an excuse."

"I knew you were not well, Maria. No, I won't go without you; but you can send an excuse for both. Do that, and we will pass a quiet evening at home together; we do not often get a chance of one."

"But it will annoy her, two excuses at the last moment; I think you had better go; but come home as soon as dinner is over, will you?"

"I suppose I must, if you insist on it; but promise me to lie down and keep quite quiet."

It was easy to promise; and till Count Langen left the house she seemingly rested, that is, she

lay down and closed her eyes ; but no sooner was he gone than she sprang up and locked her door ; then feeling safe and alone, she took her pen to write a reply to Hugh Mostyn's letter. But she found it no easy task. Her first impulse was to refuse ; there was a bitterness in her feelings towards him that at this moment amounted to hatred ; but with it came a fear so intense, that she dared not go counter to what he termed his suggestion. Letters were not safe, she knew that ; one might by chance fall into her husband's hands, and then God alone knew what would result. She felt certain he could write nothing but what she would risk her life rather than that her husband should read. And yet how could she consent!—where could she meet him ?

She thought over every conceivable plan ; she racked her brain till her whole head seemed in a whirl : at last she hardly had the power of condensing her thoughts on the point. She found herself wandering back to scenes and events belonging to the past ; till her eye would fall on that short note before her and recal her to the terrible present. Again would she labour to think of some

place where she might have the interview ; till again one thought led to another, and once more would she be far, far away. This time she was brought back to the task before her by the clock striking nine ; she started, and a fresh fear crept over her ; her husband might soon be home, and the letter must be sent before his return.

In utter hopelessness of herself naming a place, she wrote off hurriedly :

“ I will meet you any where you choose to appoint at seven to-morrow evening.”

She just remembered her husband had a long-standing engagement for that evening without her ; therefore it was too good and safe an opportunity for her to let slip. Her great anxiety at this moment was to keep her husband as long as she could in ignorance of the whole matter, and, if possible, for ever.

She rang the bell, and desired the note to be taken at once to the Athenæum, and to ask for an answer. It was better, she thought, to do that than leave it for him to send. She could be on the watch for the reply, provided one came ; whereas if he again sent, it might not be so easy

for her to receive it unknown to the Count. Fortune seemed to favour her on this occasion; for not only did an answer come, but it came before Count Langen's return, which happened to be delayed from some trifling cause.

It contained a few words only, saying he would be at Mrs. Ewart's house in Woburn-place at the hour she stated on the following evening. She crushed the letter up in her hand, and with her lips tightly compressed, she prayed in her innermost heart that God would strike the writer dead before he could hurl the blow she felt he was about to overwhelm her with!

She burnt the note; and when her husband came in, she had sufficiently mastered her outward emotion to render it invisible to him; but the torment she had undergone left her countenance like one who had just gone through some terrible bodily pain. He insisted on her going to bed immediately, and but for her earnest entreaties, would have sent for medical advice.

The night was fearful. In the stillness and darkness, she felt almost out of her mind: sleep was as far from her pillow as peace; but she lay

quiet, that her husband might think she slept. She could not bear to talk ; she could not bear to hear his kind and soothing words ; she could have borne harshness and severity better. At last, with daylight, she tried to shake off the agony of fear she had been enduring. She argued with herself that till the worst actually came there was hope. She remembered how powerful her influence had once been over the man she now was trembling at the thought of encountering ; and she buoyed herself up with the hope that it might not all have entirely ceased.

It was well she had this feeble staff to lean on during the long hours that must pass before evening came, or she would hardly have been capable of fulfilling her engagement. Her chief endeavour now was to allay her husband's anxiety concerning her ; but this was not so easy a task as she imagined. Where we love, we are apt to be oversolicitous, and often entertain groundless fears ; but if real cause exists, it is difficult to be blinded. A sleepless night, without the brain being racked the whole while, is sufficient of itself to give a worn, haggard expression to the

face ; but where the mind has been under pressure of some great fear, it works a havoc that days do not remove.

“ I cannot leave you, Maria,” said her husband after breakfast, when the usual time came for him to go to the office ; “ I could do nothing, if I went. I will send round and see if there is any thing of importance to attend to ; and if so, the papers can be sent to me.”

There was no use in opposing him beyond a certain point ; so after saying it was all nonsense, she felt well enough, and that he could go with impunity, she gave it up, fearing by too much pressing she might overshoot the mark, and suspicion be aroused.

However, later in the day she ordered the carriage, and went out, assuming a manner that made Count Langen believe her temporary ailment was really passing off. She asked him to drive with her ; but he said no,—he had two or three letters to write that he should be glad to get off his mind.

“ I will not stay out long,” she said, “ as you will want the carriage by half-past six ; you know

you dine with M. Servier to-night, and it is nearly an hour's drive to his house."

"True; I forgot it. But seven will do; I need not leave sooner. If people will live at such a distance, they can't expect one to dine at half-past seven. I don't care about going; I would rather stay at home, particularly as you are so unwell."

"Why, George, you will frighten me into being ill, if you say any more about it; I shall begin to think something really is the matter with me, instead of merely a little attack of *migraine*. But, besides, poor old Servier would be heart-broken if he did not see you."

"Well, darling, you shall not be frightened on that account; I will go; but don't shorten your drive; there is no necessity for my leaving this before seven."

The fresh air, the life and movement of all around her, the motion of driving, all conduced to give strength to her nerves, and she required it. She called on Mrs. Moncrieffe, found her at home, and sat and chatted with her for half an hour; and heard what ceased to have the slightest

effect on her now, — that Henry Marsden had returned to town; he had not been to see her, but James had met him. The Countess paid one or two other visits, and then a little before six was again at home. Count Langen was in his study; she went in and sat with him, chatting cheerfully, and telling him the news she had heard and the people she had seen, till he went up to dress; then she went with him: she never left him till he went off to fulfil his dinner engagement. She called him back as he was leaving the room.

“Kiss me before you go,” she said.

He put his arm round her and pressed her to him. For a moment she clung to him, and then freeing herself, said, looking up at him with a softer expression in her large brown eyes than was usually seen,

“You do love me, George, I think.”

“Love you! Why, Maria, you said those very words to me the day we were married—do you remember? Yes, my darling, I do love you very, very dearly; but I sometimes wonder whether you give me as much in return.”

“Do you? Then you need not! There, you must go;” and she gave him one more kiss,—one long, long kiss,—and he went.

For a few moments she stood where he had left her. He was gone; she heard the door close, and a chill went to her heart; all her temporary courage fled; she was again the trembling coward she had been during the night. The minutes seemed to fly with a rapidity she could hardly credit; and she knew the great moment of her life was approaching: she knew that whilst her husband would be sitting amongst joyous guests, his whole life’s happiness would be secured or—lost for ever. Nothing but that man’s death—that she, in her misery, had dared to pray for—could save her from the ordeal she had to go through.

Hatred for the one, pity for the other, and intense fear for herself, were strangely mixed up in her feelings at this moment. She was not a woman given to weeping, and the description of trouble that was oppressing was not such that tears could give relief to; there was nothing that could carry off or lessen the awful pressure these

contending feelings produced on her mind. She wondered it did not give way—that it had not already done so. But minds are yielding; they bend beneath the load; rarely do they snap asunder. Still less when the weight is laid on by degrees, and the last, though it be the heaviest, is expected and prepared for. It is when there is no warning, and a sudden overwhelming burden comes with a shock upon one, that the mind is shattered and crushed; but such cases are rare.

She had not long to wonder over such a question; a quarter of an hour, she knew, would suffice to take her to Woburn-place, and punctually at a quarter to seven she left her house, reaching Mrs. Ewart's almost to the moment of the appointed hour.

CHAPTER XII.

A NEWSPAPER PARAGRAPH.

DURING the long winter that succeeded the summer of Henry Marsden's rapidly-made visit to Dunkerque, Hugh Mostyn had concerted his plans, and finally resolved to obtain leave as soon as possible, and himself find out how and by what means Countess Langen had attained her present position ; and though he would not consent to take the steps his mother and Marsden urged on him, he resolved to put an end to a state of affairs that he considered cast a slur on his honour, but which he had been unable to move hand or foot in till he was free to act himself.

On his arrival in London, he found his mother had met with a slight accident, which prevented her coming to town to meet him. He therefore went to her, and remained some days with her,

promising to return on the conclusion of the painful business that had brought him over; when it was proposed that they should both spend the remainder of his leave at Hanley Castle with Henry Marsden.

Mrs. Mostyn entreated her son to take the proper steps to free himself from the miserable ties that bound him; she used every argument in her power, but in vain. He was firm in his refusal. There was but one being under heaven that could have tempted him to do wrong for her sake—as wrong he considered it—and she had said, no: therefore he kept to his own plans, unmoved by any thing that was said on the subject.

He went back to London and stayed with Henry Marsden, who, on hearing from him that a few weeks must elapse before he could go to Hanley, resolved to come up at once, and be with him. Sancho was his guest as well, and a very welcome one, though somewhat awkward in a small house; he, however, accommodated himself to the space and confinement with his usual common sense in all matters.

“ You will let me come in and go out without ceremony, Harry, I know, or else I could not be with you.”

“ Yes, and speak when you like and be silent when you like,” replied Harry.

One day, about a week later, they were sitting, after breakfast, reading the morning papers, when Henry Marsden suddenly exclaimed,

“ My God ! can this be true ? ”

He became very pale, and his eyes starting from his head. A minute after he laid the paper down and clasped his hands across his eyes, resting his elbows on the table.

Could the Countess Langen have looked down on him at that moment, she would have seen her wish for his misery carried out ; she would have seen him writhing beneath the agony of a heart-sorrow. Would she have been gratified ? I think not ; I think the realisation of vengeance is never sweet.

Hugh Mostyn rose, and, putting his hand on his shoulder, said,

“ What is it, Harry ? speak it out. Matters sound better very often than they read.”

“ I doubt if *that* will sound better, whatever form you put it in.”

And as he spoke Henry Marsden put one hand down on the newspaper, and pointed to an article headed “ Reception into the Convent of St. Paul’s of another Convert to the Church of Rome.”

Beneath that heading followed a detailed account of Miss Singleton’s reception at the convent. It was quiet and unpretending enough—no form no ceremony ; yet the account read well to those whose interest it was to have it inserted.

Hugh laid the paper down after reading the paragraph twice through. Both were silent ; both were occupied with the feelings the news had stirred up within them.

Mostyn for a moment could hardly realise it, it seemed to him so incredible ; but when he did, the knowledge that he had gained of convents during his residence in Italy and the horror he had imbibed for them were so intense, that his first feeling was — she must be rescued at all hazards.

It was not till calmer reflection came that he saw the utter folly of his attempting such a thing ;

and with calmer reflection came the bitterness of feeling that he must have been the moving spring that had, however unwittingly, driven her to take so frightful a step.

Henry Marsden felt nothing but deep sincere sorrow. It was the blasting of his last hope—a hope he had fondly cherished unknown to himself. He had clung to the thought that if she once saw him in his home—his beautiful northern home—she might be brought to consider again his proposals; she might waver in her decision. Such things have their influence, and he had trusted to their effect; but now, by this step, every chance was wrecked, every hope crushed to the earth.

His love for her, mixed with trust in time, had kept him alive. It had nourished his very existence; and now that it was taken from him, it seemed as if he must sink and wither away.

“ You do not know, Hugh, I asked her to — become my wife, only a few weeks since. She told me she couldn’t; she said—well, I can’t tell you all; but she spoke, just as I expected she would, gently, kindly; making me feel all the more what I was

losing, or rather what I could never win. But she promised me, if disengaged, to come with her mother and stay at Hanley. If disengaged!—she must have known it then. She spoke of you ; she asked when you were expected ; if you would stay long. There, Hugh ; now you know the story of my life. I never loved any one before ; I can never love any one again, even were I to live ; but I shall not do that long now : this will finish me off—I feel it will.”

Hugh was silent. He listened to every word his friend spoke ; but he found it hard to say any thing in reply. How could he ? What could he say ?

Harry Marsden rose from his chair.

“ You will never speak of this to any one,” he said, “ even when I am gone. Promise me that.”

“ Never, Harry, I promise you.”

For a moment they grasped each other's hand ; then Marsden left the room. Mostyn took up the paper, and once more read that terrible paragraph. Strangely contending feelings took possession of him. Bitter as the news was to him, he felt it

would have been worse had he read of her marriage. That he could not have borne with the same calmness he bore this. For long he sat brooding over the past—the past as connected with Dacia ; and then he resolved to go and see Mrs. Ewart. He could speak freely and openly to her. He regretted he had not gone sooner ; but his courage had failed him hitherto when he thought of seeing any one belonging to *her*. He wanted to get over his sorry business first. But now he determined to go, and at once.

“ Poor Harry ! ” he thought. “ He who is always so ready to offer me comfort, I could not say a word to him, poor fellow ! But he is spared knowing the truth. He would have felt it more perhaps then. Good God, what trouble and sorrow there is in this world ! ”

An hour passed, and Marsden came back. Years might have passed over his head, and a greater change could hardly be visible. He seemed as if ten had been added to his age ; his thin face looked thinner, his eyes more sunk, a drawn look about his mouth, and the paleness of his countenance was dreadful.

"I am going out, Hugh; I can't stay in."

"Let me go with you. Walk with me. I am going to Mrs. Ewart's, Harry."

"No, no; I couldn't go there just yet. We will dine at home to-night; I don't think I could go to the club. You can tell me afterwards all you hear."

Mostyn, who could not himself bear being thwarted, never attempted it with others. So he let Marsden have his own way; and he went out soon after himself, going straight to Mrs. Ewart's.

As he walked along, his thoughts turned to his own affairs; and he considered whether it would be well not alone to tell Mrs. Ewart what he intended doing, but to obtain her aid, should it be required, for bringing about an interview. It had given him some trouble to find out what plan he could adopt, if *she* did not propose a place of meeting. Now a door seemed opened, that is, he thought Mrs. Ewart would not refuse him the request he would make her; or at any rate she might help him with a suggestion, if nothing more.

He found her at home, but just on the point

of going out. He proposed calling again, so as not to detain her then; but she insisted on his remaining. Her business was not pressing; it mattered little whether she went then or later in the day.

"I did not know you were in England," she said. "I knew you were expected, but not that you had arrived."

"I have been one week with my mother at Worthing,—she was prevented meeting me in town,—and then I came back to attend to some business that brought me over; and I am staying now with my friend Marsden."

After a moment's pause, Mrs. Ewart said, "I believe I can tell what has brought you here to-day."

"Very probably. It is soon told—to hear all I can; though I should have come, in any case, before many days had passed."

"And for the same purpose! Ah, Mr. Mostyn, when we last met, your heart was not so weighed down as mine is now. Hearts don't break, or I believe mine would have broken under this cruel blow. None can tell what I have suffered since

I felt that it was beyond mortal power to save my darling from taking the step she has."

"You may well call it a cruel blow! Will you tell me all about it—how it came to pass? When I read it this morning, I felt very much as if I were reading of her death. It was Harry Marsden who first saw it; and it has completely broken him down. These last few hours have worked greater havoc with him than the same number of years have."

"Poor fellow! I can well believe it. There is little to tell, Mr. Mostyn. It was with difficulty I gathered what I know; for the poor child was always very silent on the subject. She first met a Mr. Leigh, a Catholic priest, at Dunkerque. Something—God alone knows what—took her into the Catholic church there on the very afternoon of the day on which she last saw you. One step led to another, as a natural consequence. She sought the priest out in London at St. Wilfred's, he having given her his address at Dunkerque; and this is the end of it all. She is that man's tool; she is nothing but a piece of soft clay in his hands; she is completely subservient to him; and she fears him—that I know."

Hugh Mostyn sat listening with painful interest to every word as it fell from Mrs. Ewart's lips. He was very pale; but perhaps there was more of anger than distress in his expression at the moment. When she ceased, he passed his hand across his forehead, and said in a low steady voice :

“ If you knew the bitterness I feel at being so utterly powerless ! If I were her brother, or any relation at all, that I might lay claim to some authority, I would have her out of that place before twenty-four hours had passed. Is there nothing that can be done ? Is there no influence that can be brought to bear on her to induce her to return to her mother's home ? ”

Mrs. Ewart shook her head hopelessly. “ You little know all I tried, or you would not ask me. It is now more than a year that she became a member of that terrible Church. I did not know it till it was dragged out of her by a conversation I was having with her about you. It was then I showed her your letter ; and she admitted that, had she received it a month sooner, she could not have refused to accede to your proposal. The listless indifference she displayed for every thing,

the shrinking from society, and even her avoidance of me,—for though she did not admit that, I felt it,—made me think she was wearing her life away by grieving over the inevitable. But I found it was not alone that; it was the pressure put on her by this man that was destroying her. But nothing I could say produced the slightest effect; or if it did, the moment she went over to St. Wilfred's it was wiped off with a hand that well knew what it was about. I implored her to pause before she took this last fatal step; but—you may as well know it—the day poor Henry Marsden proposed to her—you heard of that, I suppose?"—Mostyn made a sign of assent—"he told her you were to be here soon; and *that* was what made her at once resolve to lose no further time, and secure herself against a chance of meeting you. When she saw my sorrow, she whispered in my ear that you were coming; and then I knew all hope was over. She could not meet you without your seeing what she would hide from you; and for that I could not blame her. I knew her motive was right."

“Now I understand what you meant in your letter, written on returning me my own, by saying, ‘painful and unforeseen circumstances’ at last induced you to show it her. God knows they were painful enough to make you try any thing! You see her, I suppose, when you like?”

“No; I can only see her on Thursdays, from two till four.”

“I feel, Mrs. Ewart,” exclaimed Hugh Mostyn excitedly, “as if, without feeling a feather’s weight of remorse, I could go and take that man’s life. He has got hold of her through lies and falsehoods; working on her brain and her body by such means that an honest man would scorn to make use of. They are an infernal set; you do not know one-third of their villany. But I am losing my temper, and speaking as I ought not before you. I am carried away with indignation when I think of how they get hold of innocent pure women and mould them to their will.”

“I fully agree with you; you cannot say a word more against them than I would. If I do not know them as well as you do, God knows I know enough of them to wish a wide gulf might

exist between them and all dear to me, and to make me feel there is nothing under heaven I would not do to rescue my poor child from out their grasp."

"And something must be done. I believe nothing is impossible of accomplishment in this world. If it be right—and surely there can be no question of that here—it only requires untiring patience and perseverance, and success will follow."

"You speak hopefully; I wish I could feel it; but my patience would never weary, my perseverance never cease, if I could see the remotest chance of doing good."

After a minute or two passed in silence, Hugh Mostyn said,

"May I speak to you a little about myself and my own affairs? With the exception of my own mother, I never volunteered speaking of them to any one but yourself. It may be that you know what none in the world beside know—but herself—my love for your niece. But it is not in connection with that I have any thing to say; it is about another, whose name has ceased to be

fitting to be named in connection with any true woman's. I am over here on purpose to act."

"Not to divorce her?"

"No—none but one could ever have led me to do that—but to prevent her continuing the life she is now leading; that is, imposing on an honourable man and all his friends. I hear Count Langen is an honest, upright—"

"Count Langen! What has he to do with her?"

"Count Langen is her recognised husband."

"Impossible! You do not mean to say that Countess Langen is—"

"I thought you knew it."

"I know it! How should I? And is Countess Langen your—wife?"

"She is."

Astonishment held Mrs. Ewart silent for a moment. It seemed so incredible, that she could hardly fancy she understood aright.

"I myself only knew last year, where she was. When I heard it, I sent for Harry Marsden, and intended coming over, after he had ascertained all I required to learn, and doing what I shall do now. I could not obtain leave at the time."

“And Mr. Marsden knew it, and never told any one! And did James Moncrieffe know it?”

“No; no one but Harry and my mother, who was the first to write to me about it; and no one yet knows it.”

“Of course my nephew could not have known it—it was folly in me to ask; but, as you know, she was—is—Mrs. Moncrieffe’s most intimate friend, is constantly with her, and led her into committing more follies than—well, that has nothing to do with it now. Indeed I think you ought sooner to have put a stop to this; at any rate you should now lose no time. I cannot conceive how you could allow such a state of things to have gone on so long.”

“I thought it better not to move in the matter till I could do so effectually. There was no need to stir muddy waters till they could be purified.”

“And what do you propose doing?”

“I at first thought of seeing Count Langen and telling him the plain truth; then it occurred to me that it would be a better course if I saw her and told her she should neither deceive him

nor society any longer; and that she must tell him all, or I should."

"That would be more generous than going to him. But you would not go to their house to see her?"

"No, there is my difficulty; and I am going to ask you if you would help me out of it. I propose writing to her to-morrow, simply stating I request an interview, and that she can appoint her own time and place. If she refuses, I would then write again, and warn her that I shall seek a meeting with Count Langen, in order to tell him what I would have let her tell herself; but if she consents, leaving me to decide when and where I am to see her, I hardly know what to do; and it is necessary that I should be prepared for every phase of circumstances that could arise. I do not like to suggest Marsden's house, and yet a friend's house is better than any public place; so I thought I would venture to ask you to permit me, if requisite, to name your house. I feel I am asking what I have not the remotest claim on you for doing; and it only occurred to me when I had resolved on coming to see you to-day."

“You may make use of me if you like, Mr. Mostyn ; and you will only have to let me know—should you require it—what time you wish to come, to find the house quite at your service.”

“A thousand thanks to you ! I cannot tell you how relieved I feel ; though I hope I may not require to take advantage of your kindness. Now will you tell me something of Mrs. Singleton ? This terrible affair of her daughter’s must have been a heavy blow to her as well as to—all.”

“No, I do not think she cares much about it. She is a great deal with her married daughter, and goes out more than she used. She rarely mentions poor Dacia ; and when she does, it is more in a way of condemnation and scoffing than showing any pity or regret. The poor child had not a happy home ; perhaps if she had had, she might have sought comfort for her troubles there, instead of where she has.”

“And yet surely Mrs. Singleton must miss her ; and doubly so from knowing she cannot even see her, unless she goes herself to the accursed place she is in. Forgive me, Mrs. Ewart ; I cannot help it.”

“She has never been yet; so I suppose she does not.”

“Have you been?”

“Yes, I have been on each Thursday since she went there; three times altogether. Certainly, to judge from her face, she seems more fitted for heavenly than earthly things; I never saw her look more beautiful than now. But it makes my heart ache to think about it; do not speak of it any more to-day. Do you remain long in England?”

“I have two months’ leave. I could get it extended, if necessary; but once this matter over connected with myself, and a week or two that I have promised to spend with Harry Marsden at Hanley Castle, I have little to induce me to remain here. If I thought I could be of use to you, or could work in any way for you, unseen in it, to rescue *her*, I should not have any thing else to care about or think of. My whole future is destroyed; I have nothing to look to in any shape.”

“You must not talk despondingly. You are young; you have a long life before you; and God knows what blessings may be in store for you, all

of which will be doubly valued from the sorrow that has gone before."

"What can I hope for? what dare I wish for? Nothing but what, placed as I am, is wrong. So I endeavour to hope nothing for myself individually. I sometimes think of throwing up my appointment and travelling about for a few years. I find Dunkerque and the people more unbearable than ever."

"Do not do that. Never give up employment; you would find every thing worse—yourself, others, places and things—were you to become idle. It is astonishing what influence the mind has over the body; keep the former healthily employed, and you will keep the latter strong and well. The happiest and most contented man becomes discontented and a worry to himself, as well as others, if he is idle. No; rather seek to increase your work than diminish it. I think myself the greatest objection to Dunkerque is that you have not enough to do."

"I should have ample, if I paid attention to all the nonsense to which the good people there try to induce me to listen."

“Ah, that’s not the employment that would benefit or suit you.”

“There is nothing in the place itself to occupy the mind, beyond my own work; that I quite admit. But I am detaining you, Mrs. Ewart. I will—should you not hear from me in a day or two about the matter I have been talking to you about—call and see you, before I leave for the north.”

“And let me hear, in any case, the result of your interview. I cannot help being deeply interested and terribly grieved. God bless and direct you in it all!”

“Shall you soon see Miss Singleton?” asked Hugh, holding Mrs. Ewart’s hand.

“Yes; shall I say I have seen you?”

“Will you? And tell her, I could have learnt her death with less bitterness and sorrow.

“I will.”

That evening Hugh Mostyn devoted to Harry Marsden, who stood in good need of friendly comfort. His already shattered frame had received a shock it was not likely to recover from. When he went out, he had walked quickly in the

warm sun, and got heated; he then sat down to rest in a quiet spot in Kensington-gardens, and became chilled. However, he did not complain; he merely said he felt tired, and was glad they had decided on remaining at home.

Hugh told him of his visit to Mrs. Ewart, and repeated to him almost all that passed in relation to Dacia Singleton.

“Something we know nothing about, Hugh, must have driven her to take such a step. Women may do foolish things, but not one like this without a cause; and whatever you may think of them—and God knows you have reason to judge them severely—she was not one to act without what she would consider a right motive impelling her.”

“Perhaps her home was not happy; Mrs. Ewart told me she thought that had something to do with it; and I saw enough at Dunkerque to be certain that it would require no ordinary temper to bear with Mrs. Singleton. I agree with you, no bad intention made her do what she has done; but you must admit, Harry, she has committed a fearful mistake. I told Mrs. Ewart

to-day, I thought measures should be taken to rescue her at all hazards."

"Do you think it possible, Hugh? Do you think there is the remotest chance of their letting go their hold of her? You know what they are." Harry spoke hastily, a gleam of hope for a short moment lighting up his wan face.

"I do, Harry; yet there is much to contend with; for the probability is, that she would be with them, and not against them; but I should doubt much if she would marry, at any rate, for a long, long time."

Hugh Mostyn thought it better not to allow him to be buoyed up by a false hope, though he would have said or done any thing to cheer him that was within the pale of possibility to realise.

"No, I suppose not. She did not care for me, Hugh; she couldn't of course. I wonder how I was ever such a fool as to hope to win her for my wife—I, in my state of health! But I forgot that; I felt so strong and well when I was by her side. I thought I should recover, and be like any other man; even after I had told her

how I loved her, and she spoke about friendship only, I had hope: it is only now, since this morning, all seems dark and gloomy. It is as if I had heard she was dead!"

"Better almost if you had. It is a living grave she is in."

"O no; not better. I think that would have killed me outright."

"You must try and cheer up, Harry. Grief, I know, will not kill. Do you remember what I went through? That was worse, worse ten thousand times, than what you are called on to bear. I cannot even now think calmly over it."

"No, it was not worse. There was a cure for you in the very origin of your sorrow. You cannot long continue to love what is unworthy and false."

"But my honour was wounded; that scar is still unhealed."

"Ah, Hugh, the wounds inflicted on one's heart are, perhaps, healed on the surface, but they remain for ever open beneath, eating one's very life away; for you cannot reach to cure

it; whilst those cast on one's honour are but grazes that are not felt, unless touched roughly by some unfriendly hand. But, after all, your honour received in reality no injury. If ever such a thing could be said, it might be now, when you are aware of what is going on, and take no steps to put an end to its continuation."

"You know I have been unable to do any thing till now; all my movements were crippled, unless I had written from Dunkerque; and I disliked the notion so much, that I preferred leaving it till I could act. Now all will soon be over."

"I will go to Hanley as soon as I can, Hugh; you can follow me when you are inclined. I shall be better there; and if your mother is disposed and well enough to come before you, you know her rooms will be ready at a moment's notice. Don't forget to ask her when you write."

"Thanks, Harry; I will. I think she would do well to accept your offer."

Hugh Mostyn thought, for Marsden's sake, it would be better if his mother were with him; so

when writing to her, he urged her to accede to the plan. Hugh was right; Harry was not fit to be left alone.

The following day Mostyn wrote the note to Countess Langen that you have seen; with what result you know.

CHAPTER XIII.

ONLY TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.

It was still daylight, for the evenings were long, when the Countess Langen was ushered into the drawing-room at Mrs. Ewart's house. As she passed along the hall, she fancied she heard a growl, long and deep; she looked round; but seeing nothing, assumed it proceeded from the dining-room; and then in a moment she knew it to be the greeting of her old enemy Sancho—her enemy now as much as then, that was evident. The sound did not help to compose her; it seemed to forebode the worst; and it brought back the past so vividly, with all its pleasures, sorrows, and shame.

She sat down, and tried to feel calm; there was no outward appearance of agitation except excessive pallor; and as she had abstained from putting on any rouge, her complexion seemed thick as well

as pale. But she felt her heart beating almost to suffocation, and a tingling in her limbs that would have rendered her incapable of walking, had she attempted it. Every moment increased her sufferings; and the more she tried to master her nervousness, the worse it seemed to become. She wished now she had had recourse to some sedative; but she was not a woman to make use of such things; in truth, she rarely required them; but, any way, it was too late to think about it; there was nothing left now but to bear up as she best could.

The minutes she waited seemed ages to her; and there was a buzzing, singing noise in her head, that every moment made her fancy she heard footsteps on the stairs. At last, however, she heard, one single bark from Sancho, loud and clear, then a door closed, and slow measured steps approached. She grasped hold of the table near her; she felt as if she must fall; her head seemed turning round, and nothing was distinguishable in the room; all seemed in a mist. It was a terrible moment for her; it was a terrible moment for him.

On the one hand, she was about to meet again the man she had deceived and dishonoured, and in whose hands her fate lay ; how could she expect mercy ? how could she look for the smallest concession ? Whilst on the other, he was to see once more the woman he had loved deeply and truly, but who had by her acts crushed every hope he cherished to the dust. She had blighted his whole existence ; she had marred his every prospect in life.

There they were now, once more together, face to face, and alone. When he came in, he stood with his arms folded some little distance from her. The stillness was horrible ; not a sound was audible in the house or out ; but this did not last long. He spoke at last.

“ You know why I have sought this interview ? ”

His voice sounded harsh and hard to her ears. She raised her eyes for a moment ; but he seemed as if enveloped in a cloud. At last she made one great effort to overcome the fearful feeling that seemed getting possession of her ; she knew if she did not succeed in shaking it off, she must lose

consciousness. He saw the struggle going on within; but there was no compassion for her; he did not relent one hairsbreadth in his determination to carry out to the letter his resolution. At last she conquered; she felt now that in a moment or two she would be sufficiently calm and composed to meet him on the same ground he had taken his position on. She could be then as cold and dispassionate as himself; she had no fear now, as far as that went, but she felt a conviction he would show no mercy; she might prepare herself for the worst.

He waited patiently enough till she replied; he intended her to speak next, therefore he gave her her own time to do so in. He watched her intently during her silence; but no softened feeling took the place of his stern resolve. A picture rose up before him of a young girl crushed to the very earth with sorrow; and she before him was the cause of it all. She, by her heartless cruel conduct, had wrecked not alone his happiness, but Dacia Singleton's; and when he recollected, at the same moment, where *she* then was, what grief had driven her to do, the woman before him, in all her distress, called forth no com-

miseration. He felt her misery was merely regret at being stayed in her present path, not remorse for the past; he knew her to be incapable of that; and she knew as well the uselessness it would be in her to feign it.

“I do not know; but I am here, as you requested me to be.”

She had resolved to say nothing that could in any way implicate her; for she did not know how much he had learnt of her history.

“I will tell you, then. I asked to see you that I might in as quiet a manner as possible, and in order to avoid newspaper scandal and gossip getting afloat, put an end to the deception you are practising on all around. Do you understand me?”

She inclined her head in assent, and he continued: “Your past I am not going to allude to; it remains between you and your God: but your present concerns me. Are you prepared to do as I desire you should?”

“I cannot tell you till I know.”

“It is for you, here, in my presence, to write a letter to Count Langen, telling him the truth—

the whole truth—who you are and what you are ; and I will then do as I think fit with the letter.”

He paused for her answer. He was still standing, and facing her. Their eyes met, and a look of bitter intense hatred was expressed in Madame Langen’s—as we will still call her—as if she would if she could, like a wild-beast, make a spring at him and destroy him. He was, to all outward appearances, perfectly calm ; but there was a firm set look that made her fully aware she had no chance against him ; what he intended doing, that he would do.

“ No,” she answered firmly and distinctly.

“ Then,” he replied slowly, “ I must take my own course, and the only one left open to me. I was ready to act so as to save you from the world pointing the finger of scorn at you ; but as you do not let me, there is no help for it ; and whatever increased trouble ensues, or however aggravated circumstances may become, it will be your own doing.”

“ Why not leave me alone, and in peace ? I do not interfere with you. I never desire to cross your path ; why cross mine ?”

“Why? Because you have dishonoured me long enough. Do you think knowingly I could allow you to continue in your present position? Do you think I could let my wife—well, never mind; I do not wish to speak more truths than I am forced to do. It is sufficient for me to tell you that either *you* tell Count Langen or *I* do.”

“Hugh, have some pity!” broke forth Maria Langen in earnest pleading tones. “Why drive me from the only home I have? Why force me to lead a life than which nothing more dreadful can be conceived? What will become of me if you do this? I am happy and contented now; I shall be worse than the veriest outcast if you do not spare me. Remember the time was when you would have moved heaven and earth to gratify my slightest wish; think of that now, and let some softer feeling than revenge lead you to act.” And the wretched woman buried her face in her hands.

“Ay, I do remember; and do you think by recalling the past you render the present more pardonable? Do you not think that the memory of it is enough to drive me on the faster? For

God's sake leave the past alone ! it will not help you, believe me ; it only makes the dark present the darker still. I could answer all you ask me, but there is no use in wasting time or words. You ought to feel and see that nothing any living soul could say will shake me. I am resolved, before many hours shall pass, Count Langen learns the dupe he has been made. I pity *him*, for I hear he is an honourable man, and therefore the blow will fall the heavier ; but he will not have, even then, the tenth part of the misery to go through that I have had."

The Countess Langen had had a lingering hope that if she could but bring herself to plead for mercy, she might obtain it, or at any rate some concession. Not knowing in what shape or form the blow was to be struck, she had never contemplated it in the shape it actually came. She had pictured to herself a state of affairs wholly opposite to what they really proved to be. She had thought of publicity and disgrace, but there as yet had been no mention of the former ; on the contrary, he spoke of being willing to spare her newspaper scandal. Could it be possible that he

contemplated parting her from Count Langen, without enabling her again to be united to him in a more legal form and by more indissoluble ties than those that bound them now?

“Have you already taken any steps?” she asked presently.

“None. I had none to take, but giving you the choice.”

Dacia Singleton flashed across her mind at this moment. If he loved her, would he not snap the chain asunder that bound him to herself? or if he did not, it was that *she* would not accept him under such circumstances. In her heart she did not believe in his caring for any woman breathing; still she would not let the opportunity pass without trying to find out; and there might yet be hope for her if he did.

“Do you not intend to seek the same redress other men do? You have an object, if not so important, perhaps yet more powerful than mine, in wishing to be free.”

“I do not understand you. My only object is to wipe away the stain you have thrown on my honour, and which till lately I did not know was

in my power to do. I neither knew where you were, nor with whom."

"I thought you had another. I heard you loved Dacia Singleton; for her sake—"

She stopped short; the name had no sooner passed her lips than she regretted uttering it. She saw such an expression cross Hugh Mostyn's face as she had never seen on any countenance before. He did not speak for a moment; he did not dare to trust himself; for he remembered it was a woman he had to deal with, and for her sake it was well; but when he did, his voice was as calm and quiet as it had been during the whole time.

"Do not let her name ever pass your lips again in my presence. We may as well bring this interview to a close now; it might have been spared altogether, as you refuse to accept the proposition I have made; but I considered I was doing what was right in giving you the option."

"You have not answered my question; answer me, and I will go."

"I do not intend taking any legal steps, if that is what you wish answered. Till God sees fit to

give me freedom, I shall not seek to obtain it by man's agency."

"Will nothing induce you?"

"Nothing."

Countess Langen rose and walked a few steps slowly towards the door; then she turned round and looked at Mostyn steadily before she spoke. She felt the arrow she had let fly at him in alluding to Dacia Singleton was one less in her almost empty quiver, and had missed its mark besides; therefore she must be cautious, if she had a shadow of hope left, how she used what were left her.

"You and I, Hugh Mostyn, will never meet again on this side of the grave. I have no right to reproach you for the revenge you are about to take. I suppose all men would take it in some way or other, under parallel circumstances; but I am going to ask you a favour; it is not a very great one, and I have no doubt you will grant it. Do not make any communication to Count Langen for four-and-twenty hours; and if within that time you do not receive the letter you require from me, then take whatever steps seem most fit to you. You will not regret it, if you do as I ask."

Mostyn thought for a moment, and then said, "Be it so; take the twenty-four hours. All I want you to understand is, that I am not likely to alter my mind; so do not build up for yourself false hopes."

She remained half a minute standing still, as if deliberating whether she should say something more, and then she turned and left the room. Hugh went towards the door, as if intending to open it for her; but she was out and half-way down the stairs before he reached it. He heard Sancho's growling farewell, even where he was, as she again passed by the room he was in; and in another minute the hall-door slammed to, a carriage drove off, and he knew she was gone.

Then he sat down for a few minutes, and a tide of such conflicting thoughts came rushing through his brain, almost bewildering him, that he hardly remembered what had passed between them; the past, the present, and the future were all mixed up together in one confused mass. Self-possessed and calm as he had been during the interview, he was now the very reverse. It was not till he left the house, and the cool night

air blew on his hot burning forehead, that he began to realise the empty result of their meeting. What he had expected he hardly knew ; but he had looked for something definite. There were many things, too, he had omitted to say ; one, and the principal one, being that she should receive means to live respectably in whatever place she chose to fix on ; and also—but that was of little importance—that she should bear no other name than her mother's.

He found Henry Marsden at home on his return, and anxiously watching for him ; he knew the business that had taken him out, and he longed to see him safely back. Not that he feared any harm happening to him ; but he had such an innate horror of the woman, that he hardly thought any one could meet her in an inimical spirit without in some way being the sufferer.

The little there was to tell he told him quickly ; he recollected now every word she had uttered, every look she gave.

“She was hard and shameless, but frightened ; that is, at first ; she got over it after a little. But I do not feel advanced one step in the matter.”

“Nor are you. You won’t hear from her, Hugh; or if you do, it will merely be asking for another reprieve.”

“Which I will not grant. I cannot stand this incessant strain on the nerves; I must shake it off by getting through with the matter, or it will make me ill.”

“What shall you do, if you get no letter?”

“Send one myself to Count Langen at his club; not to his private house, or she might stop it; thus giving me increased trouble. How are you feeling to-night, Harry?”

“Not over well; I shall be better at Hanley. I wish I was there without having the journey to take: I shall try and get away on Saturday. You won’t be long in following me, I hope, Hugh?”

“Not a moment longer than I can help, you may be sure.”

They chatted on a little longer, talking of the future, and what it might bring forth; where Henry Marsden should pass the winter, and whether Hugh Mostyn might not manage to be a portion of it with him. They thought of many things, proposed many things; but not one that was ever

to be realised. They were as far from the truth of what was to be, as the north pole is from the south.

When Countess Langen got into the carriage that waited for her at Mrs. Ewart's door, she leaned back; and instead of being confused by thought, as Hugh Mostyn had been, all was clear and distinct to her as the noonday sun. She saw shame, disgrace, and poverty staring her in the face. She knew if he told Count Langen what he could tell him, and what she felt he surely would, there was not a shadow of hope for her, he would cast her from him with loathing and horror as intense as his affection had been. She knew the reflection of wrong he could not brook. How, then, could he bear to learn the truth concerning her?

She had reached her home now, and went straight up to her own apartments. She desired her maid to bring her some tea, and then leave her. When she found herself alone, and free from interruptions, she looked at the clock, and saw it was barely eight; she had therefore three hours, probably, to turn over in her mind the

best thing for her to do. To write the letter, she resolved not to waste a thought on. Nothing should induce her with her own hand to put in black and white her miserable history; therefore she set that aside as completely out of the question. She had asked for four-and-twenty hours, so she would have ample time to escape out of England; and she had sufficient means at her disposal to enable her to live for some time, at any rate, in comparative ease. The thought was worthy of being well weighed in the balance. There was much in its favour. She should commence life, as it were, over again. She would, as another being under another name, lose her present identity, and perhaps form new ties and more fortunate ones; but then she might be traced; she might meet some one of the many hundreds she now knew, who would recognise her, and who would certainly not spare her. Go where she would, she ran that chance, and it would be a serious one to have to avoid; it would be a constant dread and incessant fear to her. Then there was another plan: to let matters take their course; let Hugh Mostyn do his worst to her, and bide for

events quietly. Could she do so? The consequence of that would be that the bitter scorn and contempt of the world would be her inheritance to the day of her death. She who had been courted and made much of would be worse than unrecognised; for she would be pointed out, as she had heard others less erring than herself, as one too bad to be forgotten. Besides, George Langen himself, could she face him?—he who so trusted her, so loved her, that, but for facts being provable, she might yet deceive on; could she face him, after he knew all? No, she could not; with all her heartlessness, and all her selfishness, she could not witness unmoved the agony she knew he would endure. She had better die than that.

And with that sudden thought there rose up before her another way of escape. She clasped her hands tightly over her face, and asked herself if she could take her own life. Had she the courage? She thought she had, and then—that would end all! Ay, it would end all! She grasped at the idea as the prisoner shut up in the dark dungeon springs towards the door when

for a moment it has been left incautiously guarded. She had four-and-twenty hours—a long period for many things; terribly short when viewed as all that we have of life before us; fearfully short when we know that at the end of one more day we have to meet our Maker!

She rose up slowly from her chair, and went to a cupboard in the adjoining room, which was her husband's dressing-room. She opened it; but she had to go back and fetch the candle—she could not see what she sought. There were some dozen phials standing together at the back of one of the shelves. She glanced over them, and took up one with LAUDANUM written in large letters on a label. It was about three-quarters full. She put her candle down, and took the glass stopper out; she had some difficulty in doing so, but succeeded at last. She smelt it, and instantly closed it again. She shuddered at the sickly smell, and replacing the bottle, she closed the cupboard and returned to her own room.

She thought she could do it, but she had four-and-twenty hours before her; all that was required now was to decide. She had two paths

open to her : to fly, bury the past, and carve out a new existence for herself,—it had its drawbacks, but they were not many,—or to drink the contents of that little bottle, and so put it out of the power of others to injure her. She felt the room oppressive. The evening was warm, but it was not any outward pressure that caused her to feel as she did ; it was the fierce battle going on within her. She went to the window and threw it wide open, and sat by it, leaning her head against the cold stone without. Carriages were driving to and fro ; one or two of the houses were brilliantly lighted up, as if entertainments were going on ; all was passing just the same as if sorrow and misery were unknown to the world ; and yet there sat one with such a load of distress upon her, one who was contemplating death or exile as her only resources, who had but two short nights ago been one of the gayest amidst a like scene as she supposed was going on in hundreds of houses around her. How many, she wondered, had a similar secret to her own locked up in their breasts ! None ! she inwardly replied ; none !

None ! She probably was right. It is not

often one hears such sorry histories ; they do occur, but they are rare. The longer she sat, the more she felt her utter incapability of fighting against the huge waves of fate that must engulf her if they reached her ; and there they were, close at hand ; every moment brought them nearer and nearer—and every moment she remained standing still, did she weaken her power of freeing herself from the frightful position she was in. It was past nine o'clock ; an hour and a half had she been weighing the advantages of her propositions, and she had arrived at no decision. She felt sure George Langen would not be home before eleven ; but after that he might come in at any moment. She resolved before ten to determine on what course to pursue ; there was not so much to consider, that she need take longer ; and she felt sure that her brain would only get clogged, and refuse to be of any use at all, if she went on as she was now doing.

She looked almost beautiful as she sat there ; her long heavy black hair hanging loosely about her, but pushed entirely off her face ; her features looking softer in the dim light she was in, and her

large brown eyes heavy and desponding. There were no evil passions at work at the moment to give her a bad expression; she had put aside all hatred and malice to look at her own position calmly and quietly. She never now for one instant thought of casting regret on her actions; she considered that would be such utter waste of time, such useless folly, that it never for a moment occurred to her. Besides, would she have done otherwise if she could have foreseen the events that were to follow? I doubt it. She would have braved all—risked all; but she would have walked in the same track she had cut out with her own hand fearlessly and undaunted.

Having timed herself, the minutes flew rapidly by; the hand of the clock was on the stroke of ten. She sprang up from her seat as if something had suddenly stung her, and throwing her white arms up in the air, her wide-open sleeves falling back as she did so, she exclaimed aloud:

“I will drink it! God forgive me! I cannot live to face all I should be compelled to do.”

She felt almost relieved at having come to a decision. She did not fear her courage failing

her now ; she would not hesitate or waver. Once determined, she was not likely to go back ; but she had yet to make up her mind when she should be guilty of the last crime she could commit on earth. Why should she delay ? she asked herself. Why should she live the four-and-twenty hours she might yet enjoy free from shame ? What could those four-and-twenty hours bring forth that could benefit her ? Ah, what could they ? Who can tell what an hour may not do ? As much sorrow or as much joy may be worked out in one short hour as in a lifetime ; a whole existence may be made or marred in that period.

Once more did the Countess Langen approach the cupboard ; she only looked in ; she touched nothing, and then she rang the bell.

She undressed, desired her maid to bring her a wine-glass, and then sat down quietly till she returned.

“ Can I get you any thing, my lady ? ” she asked.

“ No, thank you, Falkner ; I am going to take a little medicine presently ; I do not require any thing more. Good-night.”

Those were the last words that ever passed Maria Langen's lips in the hearing of human ears.

It was now a quarter-past ten. She had not much to do; but the time seemed short to her, nevertheless. At one moment she thought of writing a letter for her husband to find on his return home; but she soon gave up that idea, and she resolved her death should appear accidental—not premeditated. She was collected and calm to the very latest second. As she took the phial out of the cupboard, and emptied its contents into the glass she had desired to be brought her, her hand never shook once; it was as steady as if she had merely poured out a little wine. She replaced the empty bottle in the same spot she took it from, and closed the cupboard, turning the key as it was before. She had now nothing on her but her night-dress, and she was standing beside her bed; the glass was in her hand, and a table close by for her to place it on when empty. Her face was as white as the garment she wore, and her eyes seemed larger and fuller than ever.

Slowly she sank down on her knees. Her lips

muttered words of prayer—that God would forgive her. She thought of George Langen too; she prayed for him; but his image rising up before her disturbed her silent supplications, for she began to picture to herself his agony when he found her in the morning as he would find her. She was aroused by the clock striking the three-quarters of the hour; she rose up, but she felt her strength giving way. With one hand she clutched the coverlet on the bed, and with the other she raised the glass to her lips. Very nearly did it slip; but it was not to be: she gained one moment's command over herself, and drank off the whole contents to the last drop; she put the glass down, and got into bed. A brief space of time and she knew no more. Her last thought had been for George Langen.

When he returned home, very much later than he expected, he went quietly to his room, thinking his wife might be asleep, and he would not disturb her, more especially as she had not been very well. Before going to bed he saw she was quiet, and sleeping soundly; so all unconscious of the frightful blow that was soon to fall upon him, he lay

down by her side with a feeling of thankfulness that she was better. He was tired and weary, and sleep soon overtook him.

About five o'clock he awoke with a sudden start; what roused him he could not tell. It was broad daylight; and he turned to see if his wife were awake also. She was perfectly still; and in the same position she was the night before; but he fancied there was a strange hue over her face; it might be the morning light; but still he laid his hand very gently on her face: he drew it back, and exclaimed: "My God, she is ill; she feels quite cold!"

With a horrible presentiment of some awful evil, he jumped up and rang the bell violently and continuously. In a very few minutes two men servants came to the door; and they were sent, the one to fetch a doctor instantly, the other to call up the women servants and send the Countess's maid down at once.

Whilst the orders were being promptly executed, George Langen dressed himself hurriedly, and again went to his wife; he put his face down to hers, and kissed her; but a shudder passed

through him ; it was worse than any bodily pain he had ever felt. He stood there watching her, and calling upon her by every endearing name he could think of to speak to him. He thought, if fond words would bring her back to consciousness, she would soon answer him. Death he never thought of ; he hardly thought of danger, except by his inward fears, which as yet took no form.

A doctor soon came. The servant had fetched the nearest ; he was an utter stranger. It mattered little who he was ; he was likely to be clever enough to treat with the case before him.

“What is the matter with her ?” asked Count Langen, hardly able to articulate clearly, his anxiety and fear were so great.

The doctor looked up, astonished at the question. He placed his hand on her heart. He lifted her hand, and laid it gently down again.

“There is nothing I can do here, sir ; it is too late.”

“Too late ! What do you mean ? You don’t mean—you don’t mean—” gasped the wretched man, the truth slowly bursting on him.

“She is dead.” The doctor spoke the words

kindly, as kindly as such hard cruel words can be uttered.

George Langen bowed his head, and then laid it gently down by the dead body of his supposed wife. Insensibility for a short time came mercifully to him ; but the return to life was frightful. They had lifted him out of the room, and laid him on a sofa in the boudoir ; in the mean while the doctor returned to the room of death. His eye fell on the wine-glass standing on the table ; there was a dark drop of liquid in it, something like the dregs of port-wine. He took it up, and then—though there was no need for it—he dipped the tip of his finger into it and put it to his lips. “Poisoned,” he said, as if speaking to himself.

He questioned the servants ; he heard all there was to hear ; and then he turned his attention to the bereaved man, who, in good truth, stood well in need of care.

A shadow had fallen on his existence that only time could remove. But he had been spared the worse sorrow. He never knew but what the woman he had loved so well in life, and mourned so deeply in death, was his own lawful wife.

He almost immediately after the funeral obtained leave to return to Norway for a month or two. He never came back to England. By a little interest he obtained the post at New York that he had rejected a year ago ; and there, amidst new scenes and new faces, he tried to bury his sorrow, which had been sharp and severe.

CHAPTER XIV.

WITHIN THE WALLS.

THE monotony of a convent life makes the days pass swiftly by. There is little to mark time, little to vary it; one day resembles another without hardly any variation, and with nothing to date back from, or date forward to; week succeeds week with great rapidity.

The first day or two after Dacia Singleton had entered St. Paul's convent, she felt an inexplicable sensation of peace and rest. She seemed by that one step to have cut the cord that bound her to sorrow; to have broken asunder the chain that linked her with the world. As she lay down in her bed at night, she could honestly raise her heart to God, with the feeling that now nothing interfered between herself and Him. As to a longing for home, in her case it would not have been probable; but any way, under the infatuation

she was then, no longing for any thing or any one would have taken possession of her.

She had a very small room allotted to her, or rather cell, as in convents they are generally termed. The hundred a year she was able to bring with her enabled her to have this to herself. She rose at six; at half-past she attended mass; at eight they had their first meal; it was a break-fast, and nothing more. From that time till twelve, she, together with the other sisters, either taught the children belonging to the school attached to the convent, or did such work as might be apportioned to them; then came the mid-day repast: if not a fast-day, they had meat, vegetables, and bread; if it were, then sometimes eggs, or fish, or vegetables only, with bread, and not more than one meal; tea without milk was allowed for those that were not strong enough to carry out the rules to the letter. Prayers, and the various ceremonies of the Church, were performed according to the proper days and hours; and helped to fill up the intervening times.

A week rarely passed that had not its peculiar feast or fast; yet the monotony was not suffi-

ciently broken to cause it to be looked on as an event. When one did occur, such as the Assumption or the Feast of St. Paul—two of the greatest feasts celebrated at the convent—then for weeks beforehand were all the sisters occupied, each in her own particular manner, with various preparations: decorating the church, erecting extra altars, arranging flowers into garlands and wreaths, and helping in any way they were able to beautify and adorn their house. Nine o'clock was the hour they retired to rest; and at half-past every light in the convent was out.

This was hardly the life that an educated and intellectual girl could lead contentedly for any length of time. After the novelty was over, there would be reflection to fight against; and yet it would not do to reflect, or the whole fabric would fall to the ground—what had been raised up in faith would crumble into dust, and prove to be nothing but an imaginary building. Dacia found it a harder task than she had anticipated not to ponder and muse over things of the present, let alone the past, when she was alone in her cell during the stillness of night. She found it

did not answer; one step led to another; a trifling occurrence carried her to something more momentous. It was dangerous ground, she felt, and she battled bravely to avoid getting on it.

There was one thing she had felt an intense relief. After she entered the convent, she ceased to confess to Father Leigh. She had made her last confession to him on the eve of her going to St. Paul's; the confessor appointed there was a Father Morris, a kind and gentle old man, that was not likely to render confession such a penance to her as it had hitherto been. There was no need to touch on the past with him; he was ignorant of her sad story; he only knew her as Sister Isabel, the name she had taken at her baptism, and as having no worse sins to confess than those of impatience or want of humility.

She was a favourite with the old Father, as she was with the Mother Superior. They both found her gentle and tractable; but with the sisters she was not held so much in preference. She kept too much aloof from them; she never joined in their foolish, frivolous talk; she could

not enter into their silly pleasures; she had, in short, nothing in common with them, and therefore they more feared than liked her.

It was about three weeks after Dacia had been at St. Paul's that she was going through into the church for confession. In passing down the long corridor, she saw three sisters standing together talking with great eagerness. They stopped her as she got up to them, and the eldest said,

"Father Morris leaves us to-day, Sister Isabel; and next Saturday we shall have our new confessor. Don't you long to know what he is like?"

"No," replied Dacia; "but I am very sorry Father Morris is leaving."

"Why, I am sure he is getting so old and deaf, it is time he should give up," remarked one of the others. "I am not sorry he is going."

"Father Roger is the name of our new father—I don't know his other name."

Dacia passed on. She regretted good Father Morris leaving, but as to who his successor might be she cared not. She told Father Morris she was sorry he was going, and thanked him for his kindness to her during her short convent life.

He spoke some soothing, comforting words to her and they parted.

On the following Saturday there was a great rush of all the sisters into the church to get there in time to see the new priest appointed as their confessor enter the confessional box. Three o'clock was the hour for his arriving, and long before that most of the sisters were present. But Dacia, who knew how it would be, occupied herself in a more profitable manner till four o'clock, when she thought the probability was she would get her turn soon. She took her usual place, and in about twenty minutes found one side of the confessional vacant; so she rose and went and knelt down in it.

Though it was impossible to hear the words uttered—and independently of the sin it was considered to listen to a confession, Dacia would have scorned to have done such a thing—she could not avoid every now and then hearing the priest's voice, as he spoke to the penitent on the other side, which was unusually loud for such an occasion; and there was something in its tones that seemed not unfamiliar to her ear; still she could not remember where she had heard it; indeed it

would have been difficult, in the peculiar way it reached her, to have traced it to any one, however well she might know it.

Presently the little door that covered the iron grating on her side was opened, and she knew it was her turn now to confess. She had little to tell, little to accuse herself of; but Father Roger seemed something like Father Leigh, fond of diving down far enough to drag every thought of the heart to the surface. From one trifling circumstance to another did Father Roger go, till he had extracted much of the poor girl's story. The large tears were rolling down her cheeks as she knelt there, feeling helpless and incapable of moving. O, how she longed once more to be in the tender hands of kind Father Morris! In her distress she had ceased to notice the voice; but now that her confession was over, and she was told to prepare for receiving absolution, it again struck her as one she knew, and called forth a feeling that was not pleasant.

She was the last. When she came out into the church it was empty; all the sisters had retired to their cells, as was their habit, for an hour's

meditation after confession. Father Roger seeing no one else by his side, came out of the confessional; and stood before Dacia Singleton.

She looked at him, as if doubting her sight; she seemed transfixed to the spot. Till he spoke, her tongue was glued to the roof of her mouth.

“So, Miss Singleton—or Sister Isabel—we meet again, do we? You hardly expected this, I think, did you? Ha, ha! how strangely things come about, don’t they?”

It was Mr. Way; there was no doubt of that. Dacia’s eyes had not deceived her, nor her ears either; it was Mr. Way in a priest’s habit and stole, and invested, moreover, with a priest’s authority. He spoke in his usual off-hand manner, but perhaps a degree less loud than had been his wont. He was not entirely prepared for this meeting; he had tried to carry it off as naturally as he could, but he would have preferred her not having seen him just at present. Had he thought she was still in the church, he would have remained long enough in his confessional box for her to have left it. He was not yet acquainted with the ways and habits of the nuns.

“Mr. Way!” exclaimed Dacia.

“Father Roger, if you please,” he said interrupting her.

“Never,” she replied angrily and indignantly, “never!—I wonder you dared to assume so sacred an office; I wonder you dared risk coming here!”

“Dared! Do you know who it is you are thus addressing?”

“I do indeed; far too well do I know it; and I shall immediately acquaint the reverend mother. This must be put an end to at once.”

“You don’t know what you are talking about, child,” said Mr. Way in a contemptuous tone, more irritating far to Dacia than had he seemed angry. “The reverend mother is under my directions as much as you are; and you will for the future remember that to be the case.”

“Then I shall write to Father Leigh. It is impossible he would allow you to act here as confessor, if he knew what you are, and—”

“Neither Father Leigh nor Father any one else can help you. Have you not learnt already implicit obedience is commanded by the Church to be given

to all superiors and those acting in authority? But what has the past to do with the present? If I committed any wrong, have I not been pardoned and absolved from my sins, as well as you have? Did you find nothing that had to be forgiven in you? Come, don't let us quarrel, Miss Singleton," said Mr. Way, on the whole not caring to incense Dacia too far, as he believed she would not scruple to do what she threatened. "Let there be peace between us: you shall be Sister Isabel, and I Father Roger; and we will leave the past alone. So, are we to be friends or foes?"

"Foes," said Dacia; and she turned abruptly away and passed back into the convent, on to her own cell.

But when she was there, her anger gave place to a troubled feeling that had more fear in it than aught else. Instead of passing her silent hour in meditation on the sacrament she had just partaken of, she did nothing but think how she should best succeed in her endeavour to get Mr. Way removed from the position he had been appointed to fill in her now home. As to looking at it as a thing likely to continue, she could not and did

not. Not for a moment did she contemplate such a state of affairs. She was firmly resolved nothing should induce her again to go to confession whilst Mr. Way held the post of confessor. Her doing so would be worse than a mockery; it would be a downright insult to God; for as to telling him her thoughts and feelings, and the failings the very best are sometimes liable to, was simply impossible: she neither could nor would.

The hour she was entitled to call her own had long elapsed, and still Sister Isabel did not appear. Tea was ready, and all the nuns were in the refectory; but her seat remained unoccupied. At all meals silence was enjoined; therefore no one asked where she was, or wondered why she had not come. It was not till they had nearly finished, and the half-hour allotted to the repast had well nigh elapsed, that the reverend mother desired Sister Catherine to go up and see why Sister Isabel had not attended to the hour.

Sister Catherine—a fair, gentle, unassuming girl—rose immediately. She was the only one in the convent approaching Dacia's age, and she had entered it very much about the same time, and the

only one for whom Dacia entertained the slightest regard or liking.

She knocked gently at the door ; and then, on Dacia opening it, delivered her message. Perhaps the two were both a little mistrustful of the other, or then and there might each have poured forth their troubles into the other's ear, for Sister Catherine was not without her own. But reticence and silence were so incessantly dinned into them, that it did not take long, especially with an uncommunicative nature, to make both become natural to them.

“Is it possible !” said Dacia in dismay. “I had no idea that it was near six ; wait one moment and I will come with you.”

Dacia explained to the mother that she had not heard the bell ; and having been detained somewhat longer than usual at confession, she had not marked the time correctly.

On retiring to rest at night, however, she found none. Instead of feeling the peace and repose she had hitherto done, she was tortured by recollections of the past,—recollections called forth by the reappearance of that man, for whom she

entertained nothing but a loathing dislike. She thought of that night on the Downs at Dunkerque, when she had been rescued from his insults by one still all too dear to her. Ah, how harrowing were those thoughts ! Then they came again, after she imagined them destroyed for ever, more powerfully still, forcing themselves uppermost, till she could no longer control herself. She rose up, and in the dark she searched for her *Golden Manual* ; she knew it from its size ; and opening it, she felt for some dried leaves that were treasured within it. She found them soon—she knew well what part of the book they were in—and then she pressed them to her lips with passionate ardour ; she imprinted burning kisses on those withered souvenirs of a past and disastrous love. They were all that remained to her ; she had kept them, though she had destroyed the scrap of paper that came with them on that memorable day—the day of the Dunkerque ball and poor Babette's terrible end.

Her thoughts again reverted to Mr. Way, and she became calmer. She returned to her bed, after laying her book once more down on the

table, but not to sleep; she could not obtain forgetfulness, though she tried. She found herself always pondering over the same question, What ought she to do? On the morrow, nothing, for it was Sunday; but Monday she resolved on speaking to the Mother Superior; then she wavered again, and thought it would perhaps be best to tide over till the Wednesday—Wednesdays and Saturdays being the days appointed for confessions. Perhaps Mr. Way would not come again; if so, she need say nothing; but if he did, then she would refuse to go to confession, and the result would have to be seen.

Perhaps her decision was the wisest; at any rate, having come to one, tranquillised her; and towards morning she fell into a heavy sleep—too heavy to be refreshing. It was not for long, as at six the great bell was rung by one of the lay sisters—rung long enough and loud enough to awake any one not sleeping the sleep of death. She rose up instantly; but she felt an oppression that she could not account for, till she called to remembrance the occurrence of the previous day; then, when it all flashed across her, she felt for the

first time the difficulty of the struggle before her. It all resolved itself into this one question, Which was the stronger, she or Mr. Way? Time alone could answer that; and she endeavoured to wait patiently for the moment that was to decide it.

At last Wednesday came; and, as usual, all repaired to the church in time to take their turn at the confessional, Dacia amongst the rest; but instead of taking her usual seat, she placed herself next to Sister Catherine.

“Will you go before me?” she asked in a whisper.

The other nodded an assent, and went as soon as she had the opportunity.

“Was it Father Roger?” asked Dacia, when she came back again.

“Yes,” replied Sister Catherine.

Upon which Dacia rose up from her seat and left the church. None noticed that she had not been to confession, as amongst so many it was hardly probable, unless she had been especially watched, that they would.

Dacia Singleton went straight to the Superior of the convent.

“I cannot go to confession to-day, mother.”

“Why not, my child?” asked the rev. mother to Dacia’s strange statement. She was a thin spare woman, between fifty and sixty, with a face entirely of one shade; there was not a vestige of colour in any part of it, the whole being a yellowish white. She was kind and gentle enough to those over whom she had been placed; but she seemed too withered up to have much feeling left in her. What there was had been kindled into life by Dacia Singleton; there was something in her youth and beauty that had drawn her towards her; and she felt, unknown, or perhaps it would be better to say unacknowledged, to herself, a regret that one like her should be doomed to such an existence,—shut up for life within the four walls of what was little better than a prison, and destined to spend every day of it in wasting the talents that God had endowed her with.

“Because I cannot confess to Father Roger.”

There was a determined look in the gentle Sister Isabel’s face that the mother had never seen there before. She had always been so yielding, so submissive, that she could not understand

how those sparkling, almost angry eyes were in keeping with her sweet disposition.

“My child, I do not understand you. Tell me what it is, for something must have happened to have roused you thus.”

“I will tell you, mother. Father Roger is not Father Roger at all; he is a Mr. Way, and he was the Protestant clergyman at Dunkerque when I and my mother lived there. He had to leave for something very bad; besides, every one knew him to be all that is wicked. I fancied one day I saw him at St. Wilfred's, but I could hardly believe it; however, I suppose it was him; at any rate, he is not a fit man to be a priest, and I won't confess to him again.”

Dacia Singleton spoke very rapidly, her face flushing with excitement. It was long since she had been so roused, and it was the first rough wave she had met with on the smooth sea of her convent life. But they seemed to be commencing soon enough; and apparently it was one she was not likely to allow to wash over her; she looked prepared to resist and battle against it to the last.

“This is a serious affair, my daughter. I hardly know what to say to you.”

She knew as well as that Dacia was standing before her it would be waste of time, and undermining her authority, to attempt coercion. She thought it would be advisable to send for and consult with Father Leigh. St. Paul's worked with St. Wilfred's; therefore all the fathers were known to the Superior of the convent, but Father Leigh especially. He had been instrumental in sending more than one inmate there. “Go to your cell now, and remain there till I come to you,” continued the mother.

Dacia did as she was desired, but not meekly and humbly, as she would have done a week ago. The sight of that man, and the indignity she considered she had suffered, had galled her to the very quick. She felt neither pride nor temper had been so subdued as she had flattered herself; they had slumbered at her bidding, but they seemed thoroughly awakened by this occurrence. As she sat on the little stool in her small bare-looking room, she fretted against the authority exercised over her; she did not admit it, and that

increased her irritability. She longed, like a caged bird, to get out ; she thought that if, instead of sitting there, she could walk in the broad sunshine, and see the clear blue sky above her, and feel the fresh breeze on her cheek, she could resign herself more meekly to the inevitable—that inevitable in which hitherto she had felt repose, but that now was chafing and fretting her.

She was beginning soon, though unconsciously, to repent.

CHAPTER XV.

OVERSHOOTING THE MARK.

THE reverend mother sent down one of the lay sisters to St. Wilfred's with a request that Father Leigh would go to the convent as soon as possible. But Father Leigh was out, and was not expected back before six o'clock. There was no help for it; the mother had to wait patiently, and Dacia also; for she resolved that no one should hold communication with her till she knew what Father Leigh advised to be done. Such an event as a sister refusing to confess to the convent confessor had never occurred within her memory; disobedience in all shape and form indeed was so rare, that when it did happen, generally an appeal for counsel was made.

Father Leigh felt no surprise at the summons; they often came; he was so energetic, so willing always to lend a helping hand in any little matter

going on, always ready to be of use, that he became a universal favourite at the convent. The children all liked him better than any of the other Fathers; and when it was his turn to examine them, they took greater pains to be quick and attentive, in order to gain a word of praise from his lips.

He walked straight off to St. Paul's on hearing the message. The distance was not great—five minutes took him there. He was shown into the parlour, the only spot in the house a man's foot was allowed to tread. The reverend mother soon joined him; and after a distant salutation—they never shake hands—the Superior told him her grievance and difficulty.

“You may know her, perhaps, better than I do, Father Leigh; but I think I understand her disposition well enough to be sure that beyond a certain point it would be dangerous to go. It will not do to permit disobedience, and therefore it will not do to try and enforce what will not be carried out. We cannot *make* her speak, if she refuses; it is not like any other thing that would depend on the power we might choose to exercise: and

I doubt much her being intimidated by any thing."

"She might be influenced by gentleness, if not severity."

"It is the only chance. Do you know Father Roger?"

"Only as being one of us now, and that he has had the blessed privilege of becoming a convert. He was a Protestant clergyman. But you know, mother, we have nothing to do with a man's past, when he was a heretic especially. Why, what could one expect but evil then?"

"I think that might be a good argument to use with her. Will you see her, and hear what she says? I have not allowed her to leave her cell; for in the excited state she clearly was in, I thought it would be dangerous to allow her to hold communication with any of the sisters."

"You were right. I think I might perhaps put it all smooth, if I see her. She can confess to me this evening, mother, if you have no objection, and then on Saturday I hope she will return to Father Roger without offering any opposition."

Dacia was far from having improved her state

of mind by silent communion with herself; she had, on the contrary, aggravated it by giving way to a rebellious spirit, that had no business to exist in one who had resigned her will into other hands than her own. She also felt vexed at being left there all that time without a soul coming near her. She liked the mother sufficiently not to go against her commands; but yet not enough to comply with them cheerfully, especially when they took the form they then had.

She rose up as she entered her cell. The mother hoped to see a meeker spirit than evidently was within the beautiful girl before her; and she felt a blessed relief at having passed the responsibility of humbling it on to Father Leigh. She had intended saying something about hoping quiet and solitude had produced a beneficial effect, but she deemed it wiser to say nothing; she saw it had done no such thing, and therefore it would only exasperate and increase the evil by making so useless a remark.

“Father Leigh is in the parlour, my daughter, and wishes to speak to you. Will you go down to him?”

"I am ready to do so," replied Dacia; and as the mother made way for her to pass on before her, she thought that girl was more fitted to be seated on a throne and rule than be a nun compelled to submit to rules and orders totally out of keeping with her nature.

"You wish to see me, Father Leigh?" said Dacia, with her head erect, as looking almost defiant at the young priest.

He saw in a moment that if he did not succeed by pleading and imploring, he would not succeed at all.

"I hear, Sister Isabel, that you refuse to confess to Father Roger, because he once was a man whose actions were not in accordance with God's laws. I can hardly believe it, because I can hardly credit that one who has voluntarily retired from the world to devote herself to God and charitable works should possess so unchristian-like a spirit, should be so uncharitable towards her neighbour."

There was a pause. Dacia made no reply, but she felt Father Leigh's argument was right.

"Whatever you knew him guilty of, my child, however great the sins, remember he was a heretic

at the time ; God's grace had not been accorded him. What right have you to condemn a man for errors that he has truly repented of, and for which he has received forgiveness ?”

“None, Father Leigh ; and all you say is true ; but I *cannot* bring myself to confess to that man, —I *cannot* do it.”

“Then you are already prepared to break one of your vows, so recently taken.”

Father Leigh tried to keep calm ; but opposition from a woman was a thing so new, that he found some difficulty in not speaking as he would have done had Dacia been another sort of being.

“I do not wish to break any vow, unless I am driven to do so.”

“Driven to do so ! Can any thing, ought any thing to drive you to commit so heinous a sin ?”

“No, it ought not ; but nevertheless it does, that is, if by my refusing to confess to Mr. Way I am guilty of a sin.”

“Sister Isabel, let me show you how it will. You have sworn implicit obedience to the dictates of the Church. The Church commands you to

make Father Roger your confessor, and you refuse. It is not difficult to see the sin in that. If you disobey in one thing, may you not in many? Supposing each sister in the convent took into their heads to refuse certain confessors, what would be the result? There might, if they were permitted to have their own way, be thirty-nine confessors to attend here—one for each sister. No, it is not a point that bears arguing; you must see yourself the folly of your resistance, and the necessity for submission.”

“I may see it, but nevertheless I cannot do it. Why can I not confess to you? you come here often enough. This is a peculiar case, Father Leigh; there is no use in my trying,—I cannot get over the intense horror of that man. I could not, if I tried, make a good confession to him.”

“It is not the man you confess to; you confess to God; he is but the medium through whom you obtain absolution.”

“And do you think I could receive absolution from Mr. Way? Why, Father Leigh, it would be no more to me than if he never uttered a word.”

She looked up at the priest as she spoke; he

too saw the same expression the mother had ; he saw the same look of defiance, and felt that for the moment he was conquered. There was nothing to be done with her in that mood ; and therefore the less that was now said the better.

“ I cannot be your confessor ; it is not in my power. I had the reverend mother’s sanction to hear your confession this evening, had you been willing to have gone to Father Roger on Saturday ; but that not being so, it is useless, as I could not give you absolution. I will not detain you longer ; I doubt not time and prayer may do what my words have failed to do.”

She bowed to him, and without a word left the parlour. He watched her as she walked down the passage ; her graceful figure looking more so than ever, from the plain black serge dress she now wore ; but it was not the walk of a nun ; her steps were not short and shuffling, but firm and steady. She had not been in the convent long enough to lose her natural gait and bearing. The spirit, as we have seen, had not been so entirely crushed as it had appeared to be, or even as when she was without the walls. It flashed across Father Leigh

that though he had won her, and she was there now within his net, he might not be able to keep her. Could he have created her a Lady Abbess on the spot, she might yet be secured; but a doubt took possession of him, as it was.

The mother returned to the parlour within a minute of Dacia's leaving it. She saw by the expression on Father Leigh's face he was not triumphant. She let him speak first.

"She is very determined, mother, very obstinate; but I do not give up all hope of bringing her to a sense of right. I have refused to hear her confession, as I told her I could not give her absolution till she became obedient to the orders laid upon her. I think the best plan to pursue will be to keep her in her cell, in perfect solitude, and make her fast daily. Let her meals be taken to her; do not let her attend mass, nor move out of her cell for five minutes. You will see by Saturday what effect that will have produced. I doubt not by that time she will give in; if not, continue the same system till the following Wednesday. With her bodily strength decreasing, her powers of resistance will give way. It would not

do, mother, to be foiled : think of the example ; it would give rise to a revolution within these peaceful, sacred walls."

"It would be terrible indeed. But, Father Leigh, I doubt if Sister Isabel has the constitution to bear solitary confinement with fasting."

"O, it won't hurt her. As long as she has the strength to be disobedient, she has sufficient left to lose, without injury. It is the only penance I know that you can inflict on her ; she is not like an ordinary person, that one might take perhaps other measures with."

"To-morrow is her afternoon for seeing friends."

"None must be admitted."

"But her aunt, who hitherto has been her only visitor, will not easily be put off. What excuse must be given her?"

"Simply, that she is not visible. And remember, no letters must be written."

And so it was left, and Father Leigh departed. As soon as he was gone, the mother went up to Dacia's cell. She was not in it. As she turned round to leave it, she saw one of the sisters passing.

“Where is Sister Isabel, do you know?”

“In the refectory, mother. She has had no tea.”

So the mother went down and saw Dacia sitting at the long table, sipping a cup of weak tepid tea. She was alone, with the exception of the sister who was clearing away the things.

“Come to my cell, my child, when you have finished.”

“O, I have finished, mother. It is not good enough to be worth drinking.”

Dacia spoke without thinking, or she would hardly have made such a remark, knowing as she did none were ever permitted to be made on the food; and it looked as if she ceased to care for any rule, once having broken out in rebellion.

When with the reverend mother alone, she listened silently to every word she said; she heard without a change of countenance the system Father Leigh had recommended to be pursued with her in order to open her eyes to her grievous error, but she smiled inwardly at their folly in thinking she could be subdued in that manner. When the mother ceased speaking, Dacia never made an attempt at reply; she merely wished her

good-night, and left the room, going straight up to her own.

“So here I shall be at peace for a week, at any rate,” was her thought, as she closed her door, and taking up a book, commenced reading. But soon it got too dark to see; so she went to where the matches and candle usually stood to get a light, when she was surprised to find they were not there. It was very strange, as she knew they were never moved, and she was going to the door to see if they were standing on the table outside, when she heard the key turned and then withdrawn. She instantly tried it, but found it locked.

“So I am not to be trusted either, but locked up, like a criminal, in my cell! However, I must have a candle.” She thought this must have been an oversight; so she knocked at her door, hoping the mother, who of course had locked her in, would still be within hearing, and come back. She waited a moment, and she heard the key put again into the lock, and the door opened. The mother was standing there.

“I have no candle,” said Dacia; “some one has taken it away.”

“I have, my daughter; you do not require light for meditation, and it is to meditate over your sinfulness that you are to be alone.”

With that she withdrew, and left Dacia truly to meditation, but not of the kind they expected. Instead of trying to mould her will to their wishes, she hardened it against them to such an extent, that there was little probability of its ever being softened again.

However, she slept soundly and well that night. The next morning at eight some bread and water was pushed in at the door, and the door instantly locked again. The bread and water Dacia did not care two straws for, but she missed going to early mass, and she was pained at being denied that comfort. As the day wore on, however, she recollected it was Thursday—a day she always looked forward to with eagerness, for Mrs. Ewart had as yet never missed going to see her. She began to wonder what they would do: would the mother let her up into her cell? She thought not; she believed they did not permit any visitors but in the parlour; and she began to fret and worry about it. She longed to hear a footstep outside

her door, that she might ask if her aunt had been ; but had there been one, it would have been soundless, as all the nuns wore black-list shoes, which enabled them to move about silently, looking like black shadows more than real beings.

Dacia now began to chafe bitterly beneath the restraint she was under ; she felt in her helplessness that if she could get out, she would ; she was in a mood to defy every one of them ; there was no relenting, no thought of giving in, in order to gain her freedom ; but she pined for it, nevertheless. She sat brooding over her position till day closed in ; she felt fatigued and weary ; the want of proper food produced this more than the irritation she was suffering. She went to bed, but this night she could not sleep ; she felt tired, but yet incapable of sleeping. The long hours of the night passed slowly by ; she heard the great clock at the neighbouring Protestant church strike every hour till five ; and then she knew nothing further till the bread and water was shoved in at her door at eight o'clock. More weary than when she went to bed, she rose ; she dressed slowly ; it reminded her more of her home life, getting up at that hour,

and not being obliged to hurry over her toilet. The recollection of home—sorry home as it had been of late—brought back the memory of happy days, when her home was the brightest she thought in all the world. Dear old Christchurch, with all its well-remembered nooks and corners ; her beloved father, whom she loved so devotedly,—all rose up before her tear-dimmed eyes, and she sat down, and buried her face in her hands and sobbed almost hysterically.

But the paroxysm of grief over, she felt lighter and better ; it had done her good ; it had relieved her pent-up feelings. She took her books and read for an hour or two ; she then employed herself with some needlework she had in hand ; and by dint of great pressure she managed to keep her mind from dwelling on subjects that harassed her beyond enduring, in her utter loneliness.

Saturday came, and between two and three in the afternoon Dacia's door was opened, and the reverend mother entered. The three days had not failed to do their work in one sense ; they had so completely reduced her bodily strength, that she could hardly stand upright.

"I have come, my daughter, to ask you if you are prepared to go to confession this afternoon?"

"To Father Leigh?"

"No; to Father Roger."

"No, mother, I am not," replied Dacia decidedly. "I told you, and I told Father Leigh, on Wednesday I would not; nothing has occurred since that time in any way to change me."

"I thought time might have done so. I am very grieved, my child, for you will injure your health by this confinement; and yet as long as you continue to persist in refusing to confess, you must remain here. Be reasonable, Isabel; why try to hold out, in what it is impossible you can carry through?"

"Nothing will ever make me confess to Father Roger, as you call him."

"It is his name, child—do not think about that; think only of doing your duty. You cannot go on like this till Wednesday."

"I can go on as long as life remains in me," said Dacia, without showing one shadow of relenting. "Did my aunt call on Thursday?" she asked.

“I cannot speak to you on any subject but the one; let that be settled, and I will tell you any thing I know.”

“Then it is settled, mother; I do not confess to Mr. Way.”

The mother made no reply; she left Dacia without uttering another word. As the door closed, she heard the grating of the key in the lock, and knew that she was still to continue a prisoner.

Where was this to end? Who would gain the mastery? The questions rose to her mind, but she did not attempt to answer them; she felt incapable; all she was determined on was not to give way. During the days that followed, each one reducing her strength, and making her more powerless to combat her persecutors, she frequently asked herself if this was religion. A ready answer came, that if it were, there was something wrong in its working. She had been brought very nearly to that point from whence all is seen with blind faith; she had accepted the improbable, and believed in the unlikely; yet there was still a gleam of light left within her,

that commenced to burn brightly, and promised fair to illumine her darkened intellect.

Father Leigh had strung the bow too tight; it had ceased to bend; it might break, or it might burst its bonds asunder altogether and right itself; but it would be one or the other; its pliancy was gone—gone for ever.

CHAPTER XVI.

LAST WORDS.

ON Thursday, as usual, Mrs. Ewart made her way down to the convent. She rang the bell, and a string was pulled which enabled her to open the gate. She entered, closing it again after her, as a written request desired, which was stuck up right before her eyes, and she walked up the narrow paved, covered passage to the house-door. It was opened already, and a lay sister standing at it.

“I have called to see my niece,” she said.

“Sister Isabel is not visible to-day,” replied the portress, arresting her steps as she was going in.

“Not visible—how is that? it is her day.”

“My orders were to say she was not visible. I do not know the reason.”

“Is the Superior in?”

“ Yes ; but engaged.”

“ You can ask her if she will see me.”

“ No, I cannot ; I was desired not to disturb her.”

“ Is my niece quite well?”

“ I have not heard to the contrary.”

With a heavy heart Mrs. Ewart turned away, and retraced her steps slowly homewards. It was a deep disappointment to her ; she looked forward to this weekly meeting with Dacia as her greatest pleasure now in life. She wondered what could be the reason ; why could she not see her ? She felt sure there must be some serious cause ; and she worked herself up to such a pitch of anxiety, that she resolved on calling at her sister-in-law's ; not for any comfort she expected, but simply she felt it would be a relief to tell some one her own fear and apprehension.

Mrs. Singleton was at home, and Mrs. Moncrieffe was with her.

“ Why, Mum, what's the matter ? you look quite scared.”

“ Really, Ursula, your face is enough to alarm one ; has any thing happened ?”

"Nothing has happened ; but I am uneasy," said Mrs. Ewart to both questions.

"What about? You always seem to me to have something amiss with you of late," said Mrs. Singleton captiously.

"I went down to the convent as usual this afternoon, and was refused seeing Dacia."

"Is that all?" exclaimed Mrs. Singleton ; "I thought at least something of consequence had happened."

"I wonder why you were not let see her," said Cecily.

"I don't know ; but I fear she is ill."

"Nonsense, Mum ; a strong healthy girl like Dacia," said Mrs. Singleton, "is not likely to be ill. But you are full of fancies. You don't think about me, or how I am. I might have been dead, like the Countess Langen, and you would not have been a bit the wiser."

"The Countess Langen!" said Mrs. Ewart slowly, and as if she hardly understood what her sister-in-law had said.

"O, haven't you heard it?" exclaimed Cecily, putting her fine cambric handkerchief up to her

eyes; "have you not heard my dear, dear, friend is no more? O, it was a shocking thing—a horrible story; she was poisoned, Mum; she took a wrong medicine, and was found dead in her bed yesterday morning. I thought I should have died with grief at first; but when I thought how dreadfully Count Langen must mourn for her, I felt my grief was nothing in comparison."

"Dead!" said Mrs. Ewart, as if still she could not believe she heard aright.

"Dead; yes. Don't you hear, Ursula? you are not getting deaf yet, surely. She is dead. There is nothing so out of the common in it, that you should look so scared," said Mrs. Singleton.

"Well, mamma, it is enough to scare any one, if you come to that. I am sure it scared me nearly into fits, and that so frightened James, that he rushed about the room like a madman himself."

"What are you thinking about, Mum?" asked Mrs. Singleton, irritated by Mrs. Ewart's silence, who sat gazing as if utterly incapable of comprehending what was being said.

"I am thinking of many things, Barbara, but

chiefly about your child; though this is indeed shocking news you have given me."

"I will go and see Dacia to-morrow," said Cecily; "I have not been yet. But then I have not had time."

"You will not be let see her to-morrow; Thursday afternoon is the only time; so you must wait till next Thursday."

"O, they will let me in! Depend upon it, if I drive down there in the carriage, they won't refuse me; they like people to go there in style and make a show outside their gates. Will you come, mamma?"

"Yes, my dear; I daresay the drive will do me good; though seeing your sister will perhaps upset me—at least if she attempts to hang about me, and kiss me and get up a scene."

"She will not get up a scene," said Mrs. Ewart quietly.

"Well, I hope not," said Mrs. Singleton; "for I cannot bear it."

Mrs. Ewart certainly got no comfort from her visit; but the news she had heard almost bewildered her. Such thoughts, hopes, and wishes as it gave

birth to within her ! She could not help it ; she felt as if she could then and there go down on her knees and thank God for his interposition. Dreadful as it was, when she thought of it calmly, still she could not divest herself of a feeling of thankfulness. She wondered for a moment whether Dacia had heard of it, and had of her own free will refused to see her, fearing to trust herself. But she soon dismissed that idea as utterly ridiculous.

She hastened home ; her heart lighter, her hopeful disposition brightening up all that had hitherto seemed dark and sombre. She was not long kept waiting at the door ; apparently the servant was on the look-out for her ; for the instant she knocked, it was opened.

“ If you please, ma’am, Mr. Mostyn is in the drawing-room. He has been nearly an hour here, waiting to see you.”

Mrs. Ewart hurried upstairs. She found Hugh Mostyn walking up and down the room, his head down, and buried in thought. He had not heard the door open ; he started at her voice.

“ I am sorry you have had to wait so long.”
She scarcely knew what to say.

“ I hardly know how long I have been here. You have heard—?”

“ I have—but only this moment. God’s ways are best, if we would only at all times leave things in his hands.”

“ Yes. But it was very awful. *I* feel sure she took the poison premeditatedly. I feel too as if I drove her to do it.”

“ No ; you have no cause to feel that ; you did nothing unnecessarily harsh. It is awful, I admit ; but had she lived, her life might have been worse than her death. Let us trust she did not knowingly destroy herself. Now her secret may die with her. You are not called on to open the eyes of that poor man she deceived so long. His sorrow will doubtless be severe—for I always heard he was most sincerely attached to her—there is no need to increase it.”

“ I think you are right ; it would be totally unnecessary to aggravate his misery by useless torture. His being a foreigner renders it still more needless : he will probably leave the country. The best thing for me to do is to go to Hanley on Saturday with Harry Marsden ; my mother was

to join him at Crewe and go on with him; she will be doubly pleased at the meeting, if she finds me there. I am afraid poor Marsden is very ill, Mrs. Ewart; I doubt if he will ever leave England again."

"Poor fellow! I am very, very sorry for him. I take an unusual interest in him now, on account of his love for poor Dacia."

"That step she took will be his death-blow, I fear. Have you—have you seen her to-day?" Hugh asked hesitatingly.

Mrs. Ewart told him of her fruitless visit, and her consequent anxiety.

"Do you think there is no hope of rescuing her *now*, Mrs. Ewart?" said Hugh, a brightness overspreading his whole face. "I have hardly dared to trust myself to think of the future; I feel as if just yet—whilst she is lying dead so near—I ought not; but you can do so much for me, Mrs. Ewart—you can see her, you can plead my cause for me; will you? Will you promise me this, and let me carry hope away with me? You must try and think, *in* winning her for me, you rescue her from that terrible fate she so reck-

lessly permitted to be carved out for her. How my heart yearns to see her! But I must not let hope gain too great a mastery over me, or its being unfulfilled would be the more terrible."

After some further talk on both subjects,—Countess Langen's terrible end, and Dacia Singleton's position,—Hugh Mostyn bid Mrs. Ewart farewell. He promised to write to her; and Mrs. Ewart told him he should hear any thing that was likely to interest him. So they parted.

After reaching Bond-street, instead of going straight home, a sudden desire took possession of him to look at the house wherein he knew Dacia Singleton to be. He thought now, without wronging any one, he might indulge in every wish of his heart, as far as it lay in his power. It would be absurd to pretend that Hugh Mostyn did not feel a different man; from the moment the news reached him—he had heard it from some men discussing the awful occurrence at his club—he felt relieved of an incubus that for years had dragged him to the earth; the blight was removed from his existence; the dark clouds that had hung over him for years past were cleared away, and all

looked bright and clear beyond. Sancho appeared to share his master's happiness ; he seemed to have set aside his stateliness and steady respectable ways for the moment, and to indulge in an occasional conversation with his own species as he went along ; nor did he object to wander on in front every now and then, though he never for a second lost sight of his master.

For the dog's sake Hugh determined to walk ; otherwise, the moment he had decided on going, his impatience to get there was intense. But if Sancho had a distaste for one thing more than another, it was a drive in a hansom cab ; the dog could not bear it ; he either had to sit on the seat, which clearly made him nervous, or he had to be doubled up in the most uncomfortable manner at the bottom. The moment he saw one approach, his tail dropped, and he looked up at his master with such pleading eyes, that it was difficult to resist the creature.

So they walked on across the Park, and then down the wide open road, at the end of which, on bearing to the left, a few streets brought them to the convent gates. Hugh, however, though he

felt sure it was it, inquired, and then he walked as far as he could round it. He looked up at every window that was visible; but the walls were high, therefore it was only the quite upper ones he could see, and they had dark-blue blinds down over every one of them. Fully half an hour did he wander up and down, till at last he thought he would go. "If she could but know I am here!" he said to himself. "If I made Sancho bark, would she recognise the sound of his voice?"

As the idea struck him, he bid his dog to "Speak!" which command Sancho instantly obeyed by giving one loud clear bark. His heart beat with hope that she might have heard him, for he felt certain she must know the dog's peculiar tone—she knew it once well enough.

He was about to leave, and was passing the iron gate for the last time, when it opened just as he came up to it, and Mr. Way issued forth, clad in the long black-cloth coat buttoned up to his throat, and the straight white-linen collar round his throat, worn by priests in this country of the Church of Rome.

They both for a moment stood perfectly still,

gazing at each other in silent amazement. Indignation, anger, resentment were all uppermost in Hugh Mostyn's breast, whilst Mr. Way assumed a calm, benign, pitying look ; but inwardly he was gloating over the moment that at length gave him revenge in his grasp.

Mr. Way, with all his size, was a coward at heart ; and he was not sorry that, now his opportunity had come, it was in the broad street, where Hugh Mostyn dare not offer him any personal violence. He had not forgotten what he was capable of ; the night on the sand-hills at Dunkerque was still vividly impressed on his memory.

"You are surprised to see me here. You know, I take it for granted, what this house is, or you would not be strolling about up and down in this manner. I am sorry for you ; but there is no admittance here for such as you."

"Silence, man ! If you provoke me, neither the place we are in, nor the false position you assume to hold, will serve you. How dare you enter there ! How dare you thrust your contemptible presence upon her !"

"Be calm, be calm, and I will tell you. I am

appointed confessor to this convent; *I* can go in when I choose, and command any within it; they must do *my* bidding, under pain of *my* displeasure. *I* can desire Miss Singleton to come to me at any moment. I daresay now you would very much like to do the same. Good afternoon."

Mr. Way did not dare say more; had he uttered another word, the probability is he would have fared as he had done on a previous occasion, and that would cause a scandal which he little cared to call forth; besides, he had received strict injunctions from those in authority over him to avoid all things that could lead to unpleasant results and publicity. As he walked with huge striding steps away, his heart rejoiced; he thought he had paid off his enemy with interest; he had given him something to think of, and taught him a lesson that he probably would not soon forget. He would be more cautious for the future how he used his hands and his tongue.

He had indeed had his revenge; and could he have known half the bitterness of Mostyn's feelings, he even would have been satisfied himself with what he had done.

Hugh instantly determined on going back to Mrs. Ewart; but she was out, and would not be home till late. There was nothing for it, therefore, but waiting over till the morrow; but he left word in Woburn-place that he would call the first thing in the morning.

The evening was terribly long. Poor Harry Marsden was so unwell, he was obliged to go to bed; therefore Hugh sat pondering alone over his fresh troubles, like a caged lion. His newly acquired freedom seemed almost forgotten in the state of turmoil and fresh perplexities that had come upon him in such an aggravated form. The hours passed so slowly; he tried to read, but failed; he wrote to his mother, but found the letter, on reading it over, so devoid of sense, that he tore it up. He gave up attempting to do any thing, and paced slowly up and down the room, chafing at the impossibility of acting then and there. At length he went to bed, and after a restless night, rose earlier than he had done for many a long day, and before Mrs. Ewart had finished her breakfast he was announced. He soon related what had occurred; and most heartily did Mrs.

Ewart agree in all the sentiments he expressed with regard to Mr. Way.

“To-day Mrs. Singleton and Mrs. Moncrieffe are going to make an attempt to see the poor child; if they succeed, which I very much doubt, they may perhaps hear from her something about this man. He certainly was not there yesterday week; for Dacia spoke to me of the good, kind, old man whom she called Father Morris. Now we both know her intense abhorrence of Mr. Way, and that she must be sadly galled, if she really has to come in contact with him. How wonderfully events happen! First, imagine that man becoming a priest, and then the extraordinary chance of his having any thing to do with the convent Dacia is in.”

“Do you not think that villain’s appearance there may in some way be connected with the refusal to let you see her?”

“It may be. Now you have put it in my head, I should not be the least surprised to find you are right. Poor dear child! she is soon beginning to reap the bitter fruits of her folly, if it is so.”

“May I come this evening and hear what may be the result of Mrs. Singleton’s visit?”

“Do; I shall be at home to-night.”

But Hugh Mostyn learnt nothing; for, as Mrs. Ewart had imagined, access to Dacia had been refused, on the plea that it was not the right day to see her.

“I would not leave to-morrow, but that I really think Marsden too ill to travel alone.”

“O, do not stay; go with him. I will let you hear every thing; and, for my own sake, I will leave no argument untried to get her out of the wretched prison she is in.”

So Hugh Mostyn went with Harry Marsden on the following day to Hanley. It was well he did so, for the suffering of the poor fellow on the road was very terrible. Thankful was Hugh when he got him safely into his own beautiful and luxurious home, and Mrs. Mostyn by him to watch and tend him.

“I feel better already, Hugh; the sight of home and your mother’s kind face have done me a world of good,” he said on the morning following their arrival; “and Hugh, another thing I

haven't yet told you—the intense relief it is to me to know you are no longer chained down like a slave. I shall die happier, whenever I do die, to know you are free.”

Hugh grasped his hand. He could not speak; his heart was too full at the moment; for he felt and saw that Harry Marsden's days on earth would be but short and few. Every hour he perceived a change; every day he knew might be his last.

On Wednesday morning, the fifth day after their arrival, Hugh came down somewhat earlier than usual, and found a letter for him on the hall-table. It had that instant arrived; and as he wanted to take a walk before breakfast, he put it in his pocket, and left it there unheeded till his return; and then, as he came up towards the front entrance of the house, he saw his own servant waiting anxiously for him.

“If you please, sir, Mr. Marsden is very bad; and Mrs. Mostyn wishes you to go up to his room instantly.”

Hugh hurried up, and then gently turned the handle of Harry's room-door and entered. He turned first to bid Sancho stay outside.

A painful sight met him. There lay poor Harry, his eyes closed, and gasping and struggling for breath; his hand clutching the bed-clothes every moment.

“He has been like this for nearly an hour,” said his mother, in answer to her son’s inquiries.

“Have you sent for Dodson?”

“I sent instantly; he must soon be here.”

“Are you—there—Hugh?” said the poor dying man, as he opened his eyes for a second, and thought he saw his friend’s face bent down over him.

“Yes, Harry.” And Hugh laid his own hand on the restless one that lay next him.

“Dodson—can give me—something—I want—to speak.”

“He will be here immediately.—Mother, is there no more of that stuff in the bottle that eased him the other night?”

“No, dear; he had the last in the night. It seemed to stop the attack coming on for the time being. I hear the carriage-wheels; that must be Mr. Dodson.”

Mostyn went out to meet him.

“He is worse this morning than I have seen him yet, Mr. Dodson.”

“You must never expect him to be better, sir; it is impossible; but I will go in and see if he cannot obtain temporary relief.”

Mr. Dodson was the Hanley doctor; had known Harry Marsden from his birth, and knew the seeds of the terrible disease that was now carrying him rapidly away were born in him. He was sincerely attached to him, as most people were who knew him at all: he was one that seemed to claim love and affection from all around. His gentle tender heart was ever ready to help others in need or sorrow; his generosity was unbounded; and when does *that* ever fail to insure gratitude and gain affection? He was never too busy to listen to the troubles of another; by his own people—his tenants and servants—he was almost worshipped. No wonder when he returned home, as he had done a few days back, without hope of ever leaving it again, but for that one long last journey that all must take in the end, not an eye but what was dimmed with tears, not a voice but what quivered as it

made the anxious inquiry of how the young master was.

In about half an hour that terrible fighting against death ceased. After taking the medicine that was given him, it decreased, till the breathing was less hard, and gasping subsided.

“If you try and sleep a little, Mr. Marsden,” said the doctor, “you will wake up better than you are even now.”

“I cannot sleep till I have spoken to Hugh; I have one or two things I want to say. Leave me with him for a little. Thank you for all your care and attention, Mr. Dodson.”

Harry’s voice was barely audible, and he spoke slowly, and evidently not without pain. The doctor pressed his hand, and went out of the room with Mrs. Mostyn, leaving the two friends together.

“Hugh, you know I have no relations—no near ones—and none that care for me, or that I care for; so it is natural I should look on you—as more to me than any of them. Dear Hugh, I have loved you as fondly as any brother ever yet loved another. All I have—this place, and the whole property about it—is mine to do as I like

with; and I have left it all to you—every thing. But I want you to let your mother always find a home here. I have said nothing about that—in my will; but I know you will do all I ask with the—same exactness as if—I had. And will you—keep on old Walter, if he likes to stay—he is provided for; and also Martha? The others are all younger—and it does not so—much matter. And there is—one thing more—” And as he said this he turned his wan worn face round, and with his blue eyes looking up at Hugh—a sad broken-hearted look it was—he took his hand,—“promise me—that if ever *she* leaves that place; if Providence rescues her from where she is, you will do by her and for her as if she had been—my sister—a fondly-loved sister. Promise me this.”

“I do, most solemnly and sacredly,” replied Hugh in a low but steady voice.

“And now there is but one thing more. Let me be buried in the old vault—between my father and mother. Don’t have—any fuss over it, Hugh;—let all be done—quietly. Now I have said all,—God bless you, dear Hugh; God bless you, and may your future—be bright: I think it will.”

For a few minutes Hugh Mostyn could not speak. He stood over Harry, holding his hand, and watching the spasmodic contractions that every now and then passed over his face.

“Harry, you do not require words from me; yet rest assured that all you wish shall be done. My heart is too heavy, too sad, at this moment to think of the future; I can only think of the present. Nor can I say any thing as to the settlement you have made of your property. God knows, to keep you here in life and strength, I could have toiled to the end of my days cheerfully and willingly, as I have never yet done. Wealth gives little pleasure when those we love are not with us to share it.”

“You will have some one, dear Hugh, to share it—some day—and I shall look down from above perhaps, and rejoice in your happiness. I often think whether—we shall in the next world—see what goes on in this. Tell your mother to—come back—and I haven’t heard Sancho—don’t keep him out—of the room.”

It was painful to hear him speak, he seemed

to find such difficulty in bringing out the words. He now lay very still and quiet, and there was a less troubled look over his face; and presently he fell into a tolerably calm sleep; but those nervous twitchings still continued, though in a less violent degree. Mrs. Mostyn took her chair by his side, the one that had been her only bed for the last three nights; and Hugh moved to the window, which was wide open, with the curtains drawn. He got behind them, and sat looking on the broad acres that were so soon to become his own; but that thought did not cross his mind; he was gazing at the beautiful undulating land, and the bright, silvery, winding river, and listening to the merry songs of the birds, without one thought of self in the matter. Sancho was at his feet; he let him into the room when poor Harry requested it; and the dog moved as quietly as any human being could have done. He looked as dejected and depressed as his master.

Hugh sat some time in this manner, when he suddenly recollected the letter that morning's post had brought him. He took it out of his

pocket, and very gently opened it, so as to prevent any noise. It was from Mrs. Ewart, with an enclosure. He read hers first; there were but a very few lines, saying she had just received the enclosed, the letter not being prepaid; and should she not succeed in seeing her niece, what step did he advise her to take? Hugh then read the other; it ran thus: .

“I am very ill. Come and see me. Don’t let them refuse you.—DACIA.”

For a moment he could hardly think clearly enough to thoroughly understand either letter. The strain that he had already undergone on his nerves rendered himself hardly capable of advising. He felt, any way, that he must get out of that room, if only for a time; he would be totally unfit to write any reply at all, if he did not. As gently as he could he went up to his mother and told her he was going into the library for half an hour; if Harry awoke, to send for him.

What new trouble was this that seemed about to come on him? Was *she* too going to die? The thought almost drove him to distraction. His

inclination would have led him to take the first train up to town, but he felt he could not leave at such a moment; it was utterly impossible. He had not much time for consideration, as the London post left Hanley at four, and it was past two now; and at any moment he might be called upstairs again. To run no risk, he sat down and wrote off a hurried account of poor Marsden's hopeless state to Mrs. Ewart, telling her but for that he would have answered her letter in person. He implored her to take such measures as would insure her seeing Dacia; that if she found herself again refused on going to the convent, at once to apply to some legal person in whom she could place confidence; and that it was utterly impossible, if Mrs. Singleton chose to demand access, it could be denied; but he thought they might refuse herself, being only her aunt; they might choose to say Miss Singleton herself declined. But her mother might insist on it, he believed, she being still under age; but all that her lawyer would tell her.

He thought his letter, however incoherent,

was yet sufficiently intelligible for Mrs. Ewart's perceptive powers, that were providentially very clear ; so he despatched it, without giving himself the time to read it through. He put it in the post-box, and returned to Marsden's room.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

MRS. EWART had intended waiting patiently till Thursday came round before making any attempt at seeing Dacia; but on Tuesday afternoon, when she received that scrawling, unstamped note, she felt such a rush of fear and terror seize hold of her that she instantly started off to St. Paul's convent, and demanded to be let see Miss Singleton. She was refused, on the same plea Mrs. Singleton and Cecily had been on the previous Friday.

And what could she do? There was no help for it; she had to submit. She inquired how she was; she received the same answer again. The portress knew nothing—had not heard she was ill; but if she were ill, was not sure she should hear it.

Mrs. Ewart had scribbled off the few hurried lines to Hugh Mostyn that you have seen, enclosing poor Dacia's bit ; and now, hardly knowing what to do or where to go, she walked slowly away. In going home she passed by St. Wilfred's, and in a moment she resolved to go in and inquire for Father Leigh. She would at any rate try if she could not obtain authority from him to see her niece.

He received her very courteously. She made her simple, straightforward request to him ; he listened quietly ; and after thinking for a moment, replied,

“ This is not the day, you tell me, for seeing your niece ; would it not be well to wait till Thursday, and then make an application to be admitted ? ”

“ But if she is ill ? ”

“ Have you any reason to suppose her ill ? ”

Now Mrs. Ewart had no intention of breathing one syllable about the note she had received ; so she said :

“ She might be ; she is not strong ; and her present life is so different from all she has hitherto

been accustomed to, that I fear it will tell on her soon, if it has not done so already."

"O, I do not think you need have any fear on that score; a good life rarely leads to evil results. But I will go to the convent myself, and I will inquire and let you know."

"Thank you, Mr. Leigh; I thank you more than I can tell you."

Mrs. Ewart felt really grateful, and went home much relieved. But the whole of the following day passed without any communication from the reverend father; and on Thursday morning, when Mrs. Ewart received Hugh Mostyn's letter, she started off then and there to Mr. Thorpe's. She fortunately met him just as he was going out. She gave him a rapid sketch of her troubles, and he in a moment reassured her.

"My dear madam, if, on going to-day, you are again denied, go and fetch her mother and take her with you; or perhaps, better still, let Mrs. Singleton go with you at first. I do not think you will be refused; but if you are, tell this Mr. Leigh I am going to take the matter in hand. Mr. Leigh knows me very well, and I think you

will find all difficulty removed. But get her out of it, if you can. I should think you would not have much to contend with, after the letter, you tell me, she must have written to you unknown to the people about her. Her eyes, I should think, were by this time thoroughly opened to her folly."

With a lighter heart than she had carried for days, Mrs. Ewart went to George-street. Her sister-in-law was reading a letter she had received from Mrs. Percival, full of Dunkerque news; the only thing worthy of record being good Mrs. Butler's death.

"Barbara, I want you to go with me to St. Paul's at two o'clock."

"You are so sudden and startling in your way of speaking, Ursula, that you quite alarm me," said Mrs. Singleton, instantly taking up her smelling-bottle. "My nerves cannot stand such shocks."

"What shock have they received? Why, Barbara, how can you talk such utter folly!"

"Why, I might imagine Dacia to be ill, or something seriously wrong, by your abrupt manner. And you know how nervous I am."

"You will come with me at two, will you not?"

"Dacia is not ill, is she? for you know I cannot stand seeing sick people; it would upset me for a week."

"I do not think you will be upset to-day on that score," replied Mrs. Ewart, trying to hide her anger and indignation at her sister-in-law's selfish heartlessness.

"Very well, I will go. I shall like to see Dacia very well."

"Then I will be with you by two punctually. Pray be ready."

"O, you must not hurry me. I cannot bear being hurried; it upsets me for the whole day, and you know it does. But no one seems to have the slightest thought for me."

Mrs. Ewart left without making any reply; and as the clock struck two she was back again at her sister-in-law's lodgings.

"You don't expect me to walk, do you?" asked Mrs. Singleton instantly.

"No; I have a brougham at the door."

In about twenty minutes they drove up at the

convent gate, and Mrs. Ewart sent in word that Mrs. Singleton was wishing to see her daughter. The lay sister came back, saying Mrs. Singleton might see her daughter, but no one else could be admitted.

“ Dear me, how tiresome ! I would not have come had I known this. It will be very painful for me to see Dacia alone. I sha’n’t know the least what to say to her, for I suppose she can talk of nothing but prayers and priests.”

However, Mrs. Singleton got out, and left poor Mrs. Ewart to sad and dreary thoughts. She was terribly disappointed. However, selfish and tiresome as Mrs. Singleton was, Mrs. Ewart trusted that if any thing was really wrong, nature would be roused within her, and that she would at least speak kindly to her child.

She had not long to sit brooding over her defeated hopes. Mrs. Singleton came out in less than half an hour ; but her countenance was not calculated to raise any one’s spirits : it looked unusually troubled for her.

“ Ursula, I am afraid Dacia’s mind is giving way, she said such dreadful things—of course, not

true: that she is fed on bread-and-water; locked up all day and all night in that horrible den she is in; and that she isn't let see any one or speak to any one; and all because she won't confess to Mr. Way; and she clung to me and implored me to take her away. Of course that was all nonsense, and she didn't mean it. An old woman there said she didn't; and that she was ill, but would soon be better. And when I asked about Mr. Way, they said there was no such person; so I am afraid she is going mad, if not quite gone. It's horrible, you know, Ursula; but it is all her own doing. She would turn nun, and this is what has come of it."

"Drive to St. Wilfred's, in Winwood-square," cried out Mrs. Ewart to the coachman; and then, turning her horror-stricken face to her sister, who, after her long speech, was leaning back apparently exhausted,

"She is no more mad than you or I am, Barbara, though it is enough to make her. But don't say another word to me; I can't bear it just now."

"I am not going to, I assure you. It has

quite upset me. I was quite frightened, and thankful that ugly old nun remained in the room all the time."

They now drew up at St. Wilfred's.

"What are you going to do here, Ursula? Pray take me home. I must not be subjected to any more excitement; it will kill me."

"If you sit still where you are, you are not likely to be excited. I will not keep you long."

Mrs. Ewart sent for Father Leigh as soon as she got into the parlour. Father Leigh, however, was said to be out. Then she left word she would call again at four, when he was expected back; but just as she went out of the room she saw him pass quickly by. She called out to him to stop. She was too excited, too miserable, to care what would be thought of her. He turned back immediately; he felt it was his wisest plan.

"Father Leigh, I must remove Dacia Singleton this afternoon from St. Paul's Convent. Her mother has been to see her, and has heard the whole truth from the poor child's own lips. Now listen to me, Father Leigh. You must pledge me your word that you will help me, and enable me

to take her home with me, or her mother will go straight from this place, where she is now waiting, to Mr. Thorpe's, the family solicitor; and he will take such measures as will insure freedom of action to my niece. I have already myself seen Mr. Thorpe, and I learnt from him that there could not be the slightest difficulty, but it would entail publicity and bring down odium and disgrace on all those who are in any way mixed up in the matter. You promised me to write; you failed in doing so. Hence I cease to trust you; and I will accept no promises that merely hold out hopes for the future. What is done must be done at once. Now give me your answer. Shall I, if Dacia Singleton herself expresses a wish to leave St. Paul's, be permitted to bring her away peacefully and quietly; or am I to take means to enforce it?"

Father Leigh was not unprepared for the colouring matters had taken. He had not been idle during the week: he had made numerous attempts to bring Dacia round to his wishes; but never for one moment had she wavered in her firm distinct refusal. Her strength was so com-

pletely gone and her spirit so crushed, that she could hardly speak without weeping; but she remained like a rock on the one point. They had hoped Mrs. Singleton being admitted would make little change; they did not anticipate her telling her mother of the way she was being treated; but they well knew her love and trust in Mrs. Ewart, and therefore to keep her away was all-important. The precaution was also taken of some one being present at the interview. The Rev. Mother never left them a moment; she heard Dacia pouring forth her sorrows and troubles with almost wild eagerness into Mrs. Singleton's ear; but the manner she received it in gave courage to the frightened nun, and she adopted the plan—not an uncommon one—of endeavouring to take all the statements as if they arose from a diseased brain, and were but the wanderings of delirium.

Of this, however, Father Leigh was ignorant; he only knew what Mrs. Ewart had now told him. But he was not a fool—far from it—and he well knew Mr. Thorpe, and that Mr. Thorpe was not a man of words only. He would surely do as

he had said he would; and therefore the Rev. Father came to the conclusion he would be acting in accordance with the wishes of his superior if he undertook to promise that Sister Isabel should, on her expressing her own desire to that effect, be permitted to go with Mrs. Ewart. Detaining her would clearly be more trouble than profit, and in the end they would be obliged to give in. How Father Leigh wished Father Roger had never shown his face in their community; but there was no use in bemoaning events that were past rectifying. His last and only hope lay in Dacia herself refusing to leave; and he resolved to leave no stone unturned to bring about that solution of this intricate matter.

“In an hour’s time, Mrs. Ewart, if you will be at St. Paul’s, I will meet you there; and I will undertake that you shall see your niece, and hear her wishes from her own lips, and by them you can be guided.”

Mrs. Ewart was satisfied, and returned to Mrs. Singleton, whose patience was well-nigh exhausted.

“What have you been doing, Ursula? I

thought *you* would have been less heedless than others; I nearly fainted just now, and of course if I had, I should have had no one to help me. How could you leave me here all this time?"

"Barbara, don't talk in that manner, or I shall lose patience," said poor Mrs. Ewart, nearly beside herself with anxiety and fear. She drove Mrs. Singleton home, and then, finding there was time, went on to her own house. She did so from one of those inward promptings one feels at times hard to resist; for she had no actual need to go: she wanted nothing, unless to get through another forty minutes, without their dragging too heavily along. However, on her way, she resolved to give all necessary orders for things to be in readiness, in the hope she would bring her niece back with her; but all recollection of such trifling matters were driven out of her head by seeing Hugh Mostyn at the street-door as she drove up.

"I am so glad to see you," she said; "I have much to tell you. Come in, though I have but a very short time to spare."

Hugh's feelings may be easily conceived as

he listened to the fearful account Mrs. Ewart gave him of Dacia's state; and which they both were ready to look on as worse than even what Mrs. Singleton had described it to be. Thankful in the extreme was he that Mrs. Ewart had taken his advice, and that active measures were being adopted to resene her from the tight grasp that had hitherto held her powerless.

"I have but sorry news myself," he said; "though mine is of a different kind. Poor Harry breathed his last this morning. He died peacefully and quietly; and was free from all pain for two or three hours beforehand. My mother and I were both with him. It seemed sad to think he had none of his own; yet I believe he loved us better than those relations he had, all of them distant ones, and none very intimate. He spoke of *her*, but I will tell you all particulars another time. I may go with you, may I not? I will not go up to the door, but I can wait at a little distance; you might require some one, if you failed, to be at hand."

"Yes, but do not let her see you."

As they drove along, Hugh Mostyn told Mrs.

Ewart he must return, if possible, on Saturday ; he had left his mother alone at Hanley, and there was much to be seen to, as the funeral would take place on the following Tuesday.

“ Well, you had better get out here, I think ; and if I see nothing more of you to-day, which, if all is well, I won’t, come to-morrow morning. I feel so shaky and nervous, that I hardly know myself. Where in the world have you left Sanecho ? ” she asked suddenly, missing the dog, that was almost a part of Mostyn.

“ I locked him up in the sitting-room at poor Marsden’s house, where I am staying. You won’t be longer inside, then, than you can help, ” said Hugh ; looking as nervous and upset as Mrs. Ewart did.

“ No, depend upon that, ” she replied ; and then she drove on the short distance she had still to go before reaching the convent gate.

She got out, went through the gate, which opened immediately the bell was rung, and walked up to the house-door. There she rang again, and Father Leigh opened it himself. He showed her into the parlour first, and then said—

“I am here according to my promise. This is a very painful business, and I feel that, unless truth is maintained, it may be the means of bringing much annoyance upon good and worthy people. Miss Singleton is very ill,—I will not disguise that fact from you; and out of a mistaken, but kindly motive you were refused admission to her. It appears she is hardly conscious of what she says; she has taken some strange and unaccountable notions in her head, that, when she regains her strength, will probably vanish; and therefore I must beg of you to make allowances for all. The Rev. Mother will conduct you to Sister Isabel’s cell.”

Mrs. Ewart at the present moment had but one object to attain; and, provided she did so, she cared little what allowances she made, and what statements they chose to invent; she was willing to accept all truth or falsehood, till she had her darling in her safe keeping. Though with hope alive, she went up the broad staircase and along the wide open corridor, with a beating, trembling heart. She followed the quiet steps of the nun with her own tottering from fear and excitement.

It was the last door on the left-hand side she stopped at, and then softly turned the handle of the door. The Mother permitted Mrs. Ewart to pass her; and in another moment she was clasping her darling, her earthly idol, to her bosom.

But when she gently released her clinging arms from around her, and looked at the pale fragile being before her, she hardly recognised her beautiful Dacia; she was but a shadow of her former self; and her spirit utterly, completely broken. She was dressed, and lying on the outside of her bed; she was unable to stand without support. This was the work of ten days only; it had been quick and sharp. The large tears—tears not of pain now—rolled slowly over her pallid sunken cheeks.

“Darling Mum, I thought you would come!” And she laid her head back on Mrs. Ewart’s shoulder. Mrs. Ewart now fairly broke down; for the first time for years she wept—wept long and almost hysterically.

“You will come with me, my own child?” said Mrs. Ewart presently.

“May I?” asked Dacia, looking up anxiously.

“Yes, my darling, if you desire it.”

“O, I do, Mum; I do. At least till I am better,” she added, as she saw a distressed look on the Mother’s face.

“Yes, dearest, till you are better; you can return then, if you like.”

Poor Mrs. Ewart! Her heart was so full, so bursting with joy and sorrow, with pleasure and pain, that she hardly knew what words she uttered.

There is not much more to be said. Father Leigh had done his best to induce Dacia to refuse to leave, in case her aunt should suggest such a plan; but finding he could not extract a promise to that effect, he contented herself by making her solemnly and sacredly vow that no word should again pass her lips as to the occurrences of the last fortnight.

In the distance Hugh Mostyn saw a tall slight figure in black, half-walking, half-lifted into Mrs. Ewart’s carriage. He stood there till he saw it drive off, and then offering up a prayer of thanksgiving to God for all His mercies, he returned to his temporary home, much to Sancho’s delight.

It was three weeks after Dacia had left the convent that Mrs. Ewart took her down to Littlehampton for change. She was now sufficiently recovered to bear the journey, and was looking forward to it, for more reasons than one, with intense pleasure. By degrees she had learnt the sad history of Countess Langen. Slowly and cautiously did Mrs. Ewart break the intelligence to her; still, with all her tender care, it could not be learnt without deep emotion. She also heard of poor Harry Marsden's death, and sincerely did she mourn for him. It was not till long after, she knew all he had said about herself, and his thought for her and of her at the last moment of his life.

Dacia was lying on the sofa in a pretty room, with windows opening on to a lawn studded with bright flower-beds. She was watching the birds hopping from tree to tree, and listening to the distant roar of the sea. Mrs. Ewart was sitting at a table writing.

"Mum darling, isn't it four yet?"

"No, dear, not quite," replied Mrs. Ewart, looking round at the clock.

“It is a long time since it struck three.”

“Time is long, if you watch it,” said Mrs. Ewart, smiling. “But you will not have much longer to wait. I thought just now I heard that big brute give his strange bark.”

“Ah, Mum, the last time I heard that! I shall never, never forget it; nor the day when poor Sister Catherine risked every thing to throw that note for me over the wall.”

“Don’t think of it, child.” And Mrs. Ewart got up, and going up to Dacia, kissed her pale cheek and said, “Look there; I thought I was not mistaken.”

As she spoke, Sancho bounded in at the window, and in one second his head was laid lovingly against Dacia’s hand; and the dog seemed too overcome with joy to do more than passively receive the caresses Dacia was now lavishing upon him. As Mrs. Ewart closed the door after her—for she left Dacia to receive Sancho alone—Hugh Mostyn came in by the same entrance his dog had chosen. Sancho had now to make way for his betters.

“My own—my own at last!” were Hugh’s

whispered words, as he took her in his arms and held her there pressed to his heart.

* * * * *

Months elapsed before Dacia Singleton regained her former health. But it came at last; and when Hugh took her home as mistress of Hanley Castle, none who saw her would have recognised Sister Isabel in the blooming happy bride they were receiving with every demonstration of joy.

“You have no lingering feeling, no doubt left, darling, as to the course you have taken in renouncing the Roman Catholic religion?” asked her husband, as they drove away from the pretty church of Littlehampton immediately after their marriage.

“None, dearest Hugh. I feel God will accept my prayers in our simple form of worship as readily as with all the pomp and ceremony of the church sorrow alone drove me into for a time.”

When Mrs. Singleton paid her first visit to Hanley Castle, she said to Dacia, as they sat alone in her boudoir one afternoon :

“It has come to the same thing in the end,

Dacia ; but it might have saved you much trouble and annoyance, besides being half starved to death, if you had married that poor fellow Henry Marsden. I knew he could not live long!"

THE END.

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